

Kurdistan Chronicle

Pir Shalyar

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Kurdistan A Driving Force for Regional Stability



*Botan Tahseen
is the Publisher of
Kurdistan Chronicle
Magazine.*

Recent developments and conflicts have reinforced the Kurdistan Region's crucial role in maintaining stability in the Middle East.

The agreements between Erbil and Baghdad on oil exports and on the 2025 budget mark a promising start for the Kurdistan Region this year, as it aspires to assume an even greater role in promoting regional stability. These crucial developments are expected to help alleviate a series of difficult pressures on Kurdistan, most notably the delay in the payment of its budget and public sector salaries.

Türkiye's Consul General in Erbil has acknowledged Kurdistan's potential to maintain balance in the region, highlighting its strategic importance. For instance, the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) proposals and instructions have encouraged Kurdish leaders in Syria to resolve the Kurdish issue in Syria peacefully, part of the Kurdistan Region's efforts to address the Kurdish issue in all countries in the region. As former Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari underscored in a recent television interview, the Kurdistan Region's initiatives with the new Syrian authorities and the Kurds in Syria have already reduced tensions and clashes, and encouraged talks between the two sides.

The friendly countries of the world have always helped the Kurdistan Region, putting pressure on the countries into which Greater Kurdistan is divided to guarantee the rights of the Kurdish people.

The readiness of the Kurdistan Region to resolve the situation under the Iraqi constitution – especially the massive financial loss for Iraq due to the suspension of oil – is evident. According to the KRG, more than \$22 billion in revenues have been lost for all of Iraq as a result of suspended exports, making it unsurprising that both sides have finally reached an agreement to re-export Kurdistan's oil.

At the same time, the international coalition's assistance to the peshmerga has been instrumental in addressing the threat of terrorism in the Middle East and has helped to defeat extremist groups that pose a serious threat to Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world. The peshmerga confronted these groups in the field, and the allies ensured their victory with weapons and air support.

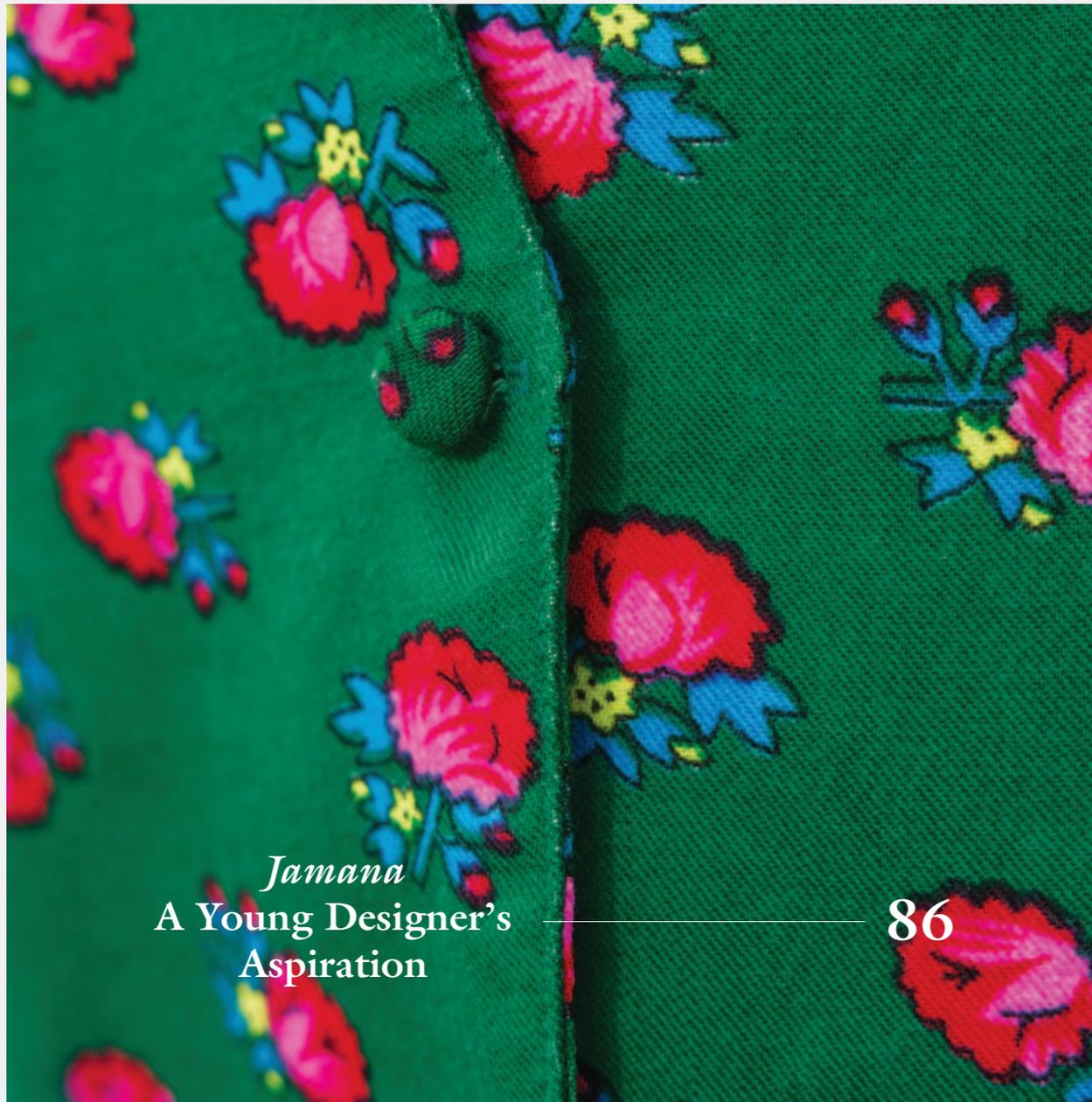
In the future, continued cooperation will be decisive in preventing the resurgence of such groups and in protecting refugees coming to Kurdistan, which has sheltered all of the region's ethnic and religious communities from the threat of extremism. The number of Christians in Kurdistan, for instance, is increasing daily, unlike in other countries in the Middle East like Iraq and Syria, where their

numbers are dwindling as they are threatened with persecution and extinction.

Illicit drugs are another challenge to the security of the international community. Due to its geographical location, Kurdistan lies on the trafficking route of these substances but has prevented the smuggling of drugs in recent years. The KRG is working to completely eradicate this global threat by establishing a training center for patients. Additionally, international organizations are working hand in hand with local organizations and the KRG to address this issue once and for all.

The Kurdistan Region serves as a beacon of hope for the Middle East, demonstrating that stability and peace can be achieved through cooperation and diplomacy. As witnessed by international diplomats and officials, it remains an effective force for promoting stability and peace in the region and the world. ●

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PM Barzani at Davos Forum Addressing Global Challenges

Kurdistan Chronicle

Each year, top international decision-makers from governments, businesses, and civil society organizations gather in Davos, Switzerland, for the World Economic Forum (WEF). This global event provides leaders with a platform to address pressing global issues and set priorities for the year ahead.

This year, participants convened under the theme “Collaboration for the Intelligent Age,” focusing on key topics such as rebuilding trust, reimagining growth, safeguarding the planet, industries in the intelligent age, and investing in people.

Among the leaders participating in the forum was Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, accompanied by a delegation including government officials and leading Kurdish investors. While in Davos, Prime Minister Barzani engaged in high-level discussions aimed at enhancing trade and investment in the Kurdistan Region.

Opening of Kurdistan House

Upon his arrival, Prime Minister Barzani marked a significant event: the opening of Kurdistan House in Davos, a space dedicated to showcasing the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, highlighting investment opportunities, and promoting discussions on economic growth.



■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani speaking during the opening of Kurdistan House, Davos (January 21, 2025)

“I am pleased this is the second year that Kurdistan House is participating in the World Economic Forum in Davos. I hope Kurdistan becomes a gateway for Iraq and the region for economic development,” Prime Minister Barzani stated at the opening ceremony, which was also attended by Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid.

“If we can play a positive role in enhancing the stability and security of the region, we will certainly not hesitate,” the Kurdish leader added.

As the Kurdistan House works to consolidate its place as a hub for investment dialogue and economic diplomacy, the venue hosted several roundtable discussions, interviews, and meetings that allowed local and international investors to explore future partnerships.

Regional politics, economy top the agenda

During separate meetings with heads of states and senior government officials from around the world, Prime Minister Barzani discussed regional developments after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and the evolving situation there. He also reiterated the Kurdistan Region’s readiness to play an active role in ensuring stability and peace throughout the entire region. Additionally, he highlighted Kurdistan’s investment potential, offering an overview of the economic landscape in Kurdistan and how foreign direct investment could mutually benefit both investors and Kurdistan.

Below is a list of the world leaders and government officials with whom Prime Minister Barzani met on the sidelines of the 55th World Economic Forum in Davos:

- António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations
- Alexander De Cro, Prime Minister of Belgium
- Dick Schoof, Prime Minister of the Netherlands
- Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan
- Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar
- Hussein Bin Abdullah II, Crown Prince of Jordan
- Abdul Latif Rashid, President of Iraq
- Andrej Plenkovic, Prime Minister of Croatia

- Jean-Noël Barro, Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France
- Mohammed Al Gergawi, Minister of Cabinet Affairs of the UAE
- Khalid Al-Falih, Minister of Investment of Saudi Arabia
- Asaad Hasan Alshaibani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Syria
- Majid Bin Abdullah Al-Kassabi, Minister of Commerce of Saudi Arabia
- Jan Lipavsky, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
- Mohammad Javad Zarif, Vice President for Strategic Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- Eduard Heger, Former Prime Minister of Slovakia

- Bahrain’s delegation, led by Shaikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa
- Aidasos Alzubidi, Deputy Chairman of the Presidential leadership council of Yemen

- John Kerry, Former Secretary of State of the US
- Marc Jost, Member of the National Council of Switzerland



■ Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with heads of state and government officials on the sidelines of WEF in Davos (January 21, 2025)

Photos: Farhad Ahmad



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and leading Kurdish investors in Kurdistan House, Davos (January 21, 2025)



Photo: Farhad Ahmad

■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani meeting with Jan Lipavsk, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic (January 22, 2025)



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ Prime Minister Masrour Barzani welcoming Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid to Kurdistan House, Davos (January 21, 2025)



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ The entrance to Kurdistan House, Davos



Photo: Sabr Dri

■ A photo of Erbil Citadel on the wall in Kurdistan House, Davos

- Abdullah Bin Damithan, CEO and Managing Director of the GCC Region
- Badr Jafar, CEO of Crescent Enterprises
- Peter Orszag, CEO and Chairman of Lazard Group LLC
- Nick Studer, CEO of Oliver Wyman
- Anant Maheshwari, President and CEO of the High Growth Regions at Honeywell
- Richard Hall, CEO of Dana Gas
- Jared Cohen, President of Global Affairs Goldman Sachs
- Khalid Muhammad Alzubair, Chairman of Ominvest Oman
- Jürgen Rigterink, First Vice President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
- Ling Hai, President of Me&Na Mastercard
- Shamsheer Vayali, Founder and Chairman of BURJEEL Holdings

Kurdistan's active participation in the WEF highlights its growing role in international economic and political discussions. Through engagements with world leaders, government officials, and global investors, Prime Minister Barzani has positioned Kurdistan as a key player in regional stability and economic development with an eye towards an even stronger role in the future. ●

Erbil-Baghdad Financial Disputes Only Scratch the Surface



Sardar Sattar

is a translator and journalist based in the Kurdistan Region. He has translated several books and political literature into Kurdish and English. He writes regularly for local and international newspapers and journals.

Almost two weeks into 2025, lawmakers and ministers across various political parties representing the Kurdistan Region in Baghdad were called to an extraordinary meeting hosted by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. The discussions focused on the prolonged disputes between the regional and federal governments, insisting that disagreements between Erbil and Baghdad extend beyond budget share and the distribution of monthly salaries of public servants in the Kurdistan Region.

The two sides seem to have been locked in an intractable row since January 2014, when the Iraqi federal government cut the KRG's share from the national budget. The financial situation of the people in the Kurdistan Region, however, worsened when KRG oil exports through the Iraq-Türkiye Pipeline were suspended in March 2023 after a Paris-based arbitration court ruled in favor of Baghdad against Ankara, saying that the latter had breached a 1973 pipeline agreement by allowing Erbil to begin independent oil exports in 2014.

What about federalism?

The unrelenting financial pressure experienced by the people and regional government of Kurdistan has, on various occasions, overshadowed the relations between Erbil and Baghdad. However, the Kurdistan Region has repeatedly insisted on avoiding unnecessary tensions while making it clear that it will not compro-

mise on the constitutional rights of its people. That message, in a slightly more serious tone, was clearly expressed at the recent Erbil meeting.

At the meeting, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, emphasized that the financial entitlements of the people of Kurdistan must be delivered by the Iraqi federal government. However, he noted that, beyond financial matters, there are many other national issues that require collective efforts from the Kurdistan Region and its representatives to ensure that they are addressed effectively.

“These include the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, which addresses the fate of the Kurdistan areas outside the Region; allocation of the peshmerga budget as an integral element of the Iraqi security apparatus; and reparations for the families of the victims of the Anfal Campaign, Halabja, and other genocidal crimes committed by the former regime, including the destruction of 4,500 Kurdistan villages,” the readout of the meeting stressed.

According to Prime Minister Barzani, Baghdad's current treatment of the Kurdistan Region does not reflect the principles of federalism, as not even governorates of Iraq are treated in the same manner.

“The federal government's approach is unjust, violates the Iraqi Constitution, is incompatible with the federal system, and is entirely unacceptable,” he argued. “We

KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and his cabinet members meeting with ministers and lawmakers representing the Kurdistan Region in Baghdad (January 11, 2025)



Photo: Sator Dri



■ *Flags of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq.*

have a constitution, and we must abide by it. The federal status of the Kurdistan Region must be respected.”

Before concluding the meeting, the KRG Council of Ministers and Kurdish representatives agreed to take a collective stance and find a viable solution, for which they issued the following decisions:

1. The KRG and the Kurdistan Region’s representatives in Baghdad must collaborate to ensure the full payment of salaries to public sector employees in the Kurdistan Region for all 12 months of 2025. To achieve this, the council resolved to form a delegation of the Kurdistan Region’s representatives to meet with the Prime Minister of Iraq and deliver the KRG’s message. This message emphasizes that the Kurdistan Region must be treated as a federal and constitutional entity within Iraq and that the issue of salaries for 2025 must be resolved.

2. The KRG Ministry of Finance and Economy must actively participate in the review process of the Kurdistan Region’s share in the proposed tables for salaries, operating

expenditures, investment budget projects, and the regional and provincial development budget. Furthermore, all entitlement tables for 2025 must be prepared jointly by the KRG Ministry of Finance and Economy and the Federal Ministry of Finance. This includes financial entitlements, job grades, and staffing tables, which must be aligned with the Iraqi Constitution and the recent rulings of the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq.

3. Preparations for the Federal Budget Law must begin immediately, ensuring that the Kurdistan Region’s share of the budget is allocated based on the 2024 census and fair constitutional standards for determining the region’s entitlement as a federal entity. Respecting the unique status of the Kurdistan Region, the allocated budget must be disbursed directly to the region and redistributed according to its own budgetary framework.

Briefing foreign diplomats

Following the meeting, the KRG’s delegation for negotiations with Baghdad convened foreign diplomatic envoys

based in the Kurdistan Region to brief them about the outstanding disputes with Baghdad, mainly those related to the budget and oil exports.

Safeen Dizayee, Head of the KRG’s Department of Foreign Relations, pointed out during the meeting that the passing of the three-year Public Budget Act in 2023-2024 was intended to resolve the financial entitlements due to the Kurdistan Region, particularly the public sector salaries, as stipulated by law and the agreements between Erbil and Baghdad.

the Kurdistan Region.

The KRG negotiating delegation, including the KRG Minister of Finance and Economy and several other top government officials, has visited Baghdad several times over the past two years, aiming to respond to Baghdad’s demands and provide a clear picture of the ongoing situation between the regional and federal governments.

However, as claimed by the KRG on multiple occasions, Baghdad’s position on the disputes with the KRG is said to be influenced by politics, rather than financial consid-



■ *KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and his cabinet members meeting with ministers and lawmakers representing the Kurdistan Region in Baghdad (January 11, 2025)*

However, he noted that the financial allocation provided to the region thus far has been insufficient to even cover salaries.

Dizayee explained that the suspension of oil exports from the Kurdistan Region has resulted in losses exceeding \$22 billion to both the Iraqi and Kurdistan Region budgets. He also highlighted that, while numerous meetings and negotiations have taken place between Erbil and Baghdad, the federal government has failed to properly implement the agreements.

Furthermore, he criticized the federal government for presenting a distorted narrative to the public in both Iraq and

Baghdad has drained one of the main revenue sources of the Kurdistan Region – its oil exports – and is now asking the KRG to hand over its internal revenues as well without providing the region its full share from the budget.

Since the sum that the Iraqi government has shared with the KRG is not even sufficient to cover the salaries of public servants in the Kurdistan Region, the KRG fills the deficit with what it collects from internal revenues. Erbil insists that if Baghdad asks for every penny to be sent back to the federal government, then it must not only pay salaries, but also cover development projects, operational costs, and other government expenditures. ●

INTERVIEW

Turkish Envoy Envisions Stronger Relations with Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

Known for its hospitality and atmosphere of peaceful coexistence, Erbil embraces anyone, be it a refugee seeking a safe place to live or a diplomat representing a foreign country. This unique culture of the Kurds was also lauded by Erman Topçu, Türkiye's Consul General in Erbil, during an interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

During the conversation, Topçu recalled the days when he was assigned to help open Türkiye's Consulate General in Erbil in 2010, noting that Erbil has transformed since then into a modern and vibrant city.

Kurdistan Chronicle (KC): How do you evaluate the current relations between Türkiye and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq?

Consul General Erman Topçu (ET): This may be the right moment to answer this question because only two weeks ago we had a very high-level visit to Türkiye by his Excellency Prime Minister Masrour Barzani. I looked at previous periods and discovered a pattern of very high-level visits; for instance, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister was in Türkiye in June 2023, and then President Erdoğan came to Erbil in April 2024. After that we had Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani in Ankara, and the heads of two political parties, the Kurdistan Islamic Union and the New Generation.

As you see, there is engagement on a very high level, and it is not only limited to those visits and meetings. There is constant communication at the highest level. There is very unique and significant. So, when you have this kind of relationship, a strong human bond, and high-level interaction, the future is clear and open and there is room for enhancing relationships and strengthening cooperation – especially at times as turbulent as these.

KC: Are there any specific statistics that explain the economic relations between Türkiye and the Kurdistan Region?

ET: Analyzing trade numbers between the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye is slightly problematic, as the Kurdistan Region is a part of a federal country – that is, Iraq. But Iraq is Türkiye's fourth largest trade partner. Our trade volume is around \$20 billion. It is less than what it should be due to the current stalemate on oil exports, but it is still around \$20 billion, and there is a common will to grow that to \$30 billion. We can roughly estimate that 30% of this trade volume is with the Kurdistan Region. However, our economic relations are not confined to trade; there is also investment, which is significant. I have recently seen a statement by the KRG Board of Investment introducing Türkiye as the largest investor in the Kurdistan Region, with a figure around \$2 billion, which I think should be more because Turkish companies have been present in the Kurdistan Region for a long time now. They have been contributing and are still contributing, and they will continue to contribute to the development of this region. Their presence and activities here have helped strengthen our political relations as well.

Fourteen years ago, when I was serving as a junior diplomat in Baghdad and traveling to Erbil periodically, I remember, we were obliged to travel to Ankawa to do some basic shopping. Back then, between Ankawa and our office there was literally nothing. And that was only 14 years ago. Now the landscape, the façade of Erbil has changed, and Turkish companies are one of the major actors in making this growth happen.

KC: Are there any plans to open new border crossings between the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye to further enhance trade?

ET: The Ibrahim Khalil border crossing is one of the busiest in the world. It is the lifeline of this region and connects Iraq to Europe and beyond. Of course, opening new border crossings or expanding the existing ones for other purposes has always been on the agenda, but that needs to be coordinated with Baghdad.

The border crossings have been one of the main items of the current discussions on the Development Road Project, which is a visionary project that we support. We believe everyone should benefit from it. On our side, we are always in constant pursuit of making commercial and civilian traffic at our border crossings more efficient. In the border areas, when it comes to any sort of activities, the main problem has always been the presence of the PKK terrorist organization. They have been a headache for the villagers engaging in agricultural and economic activities. They simply endanger the civilian population. But as the result of our joint efforts with the KRG, their presence has largely been erased from the border areas. This was possible in part due to our technical capacities, our strong political will, and of course our cooperation with the KRG.

KC: Regarding Turkish investments in the Kurdistan Region, are there any specific industries or economic sectors that Türkiye prioritizes?

ET: Our investment is basically in all parts of the Kurdistan Region's economy, including energy, construction, and health. Turkish investors are present in every field and are very committed. When I started my tenure in Erbil, I prioritized engagement with the Turkish business community here, focusing on their problems and how I could be helpful to both the Turkish businesses and the government. I was immensely proud to see that we have this vibrant, dynamic and efficient business presence here in the KRI and providing critical services to the local population. Turkish businesses and investments are actually the driving force behind the developments in the Kurdistan Region.



■ Turkish Consul General Erman Topçu welcoming Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani during the Turkish Republic Day reception in Erbil (Oct. 29, 2024).



■ KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani (left) and Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (right) meeting in Ankara (January 7, 2025)



■ Turkish Consul General Erman Topçu speaking during a ceremony on the Atatürk Commemoration Day (Nov. 10, 2024).

Therefore, I'd say that there is no prioritization. In whatever sector it is needed, there is a Turkish company or entrepreneur present. I also have to appreciate the KRG because they are always open to Turkish companies undertaking grand investment projects. Turkish companies are present whenever there are groundbreaking investment projects, and Turkish investors are trying to live up to that expectation.

In the meantime, issues remain, some of which need to be tackled by the KRG, but others stem from the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil, which must be addressed and we are ready to facilitate that as well. I believe 2025 might be the year when we can achieve developments on both fronts.

KC: There has been a recent initiative in Türkiye to resume the peace process in the country. What role do you think the Kurdistan Region can play to help the success of future dialogues?

ET: That is a political process in Türkiye, and it might not be appropriate for me to comment on that.

KC: Considering recent developments in Syria, how do you think Türkiye and the Kurdistan Region can support stability in Syria?

ET: We are now in a new regional reality, in which one thing is clear: the culture of dominance by hegemonic powers is over. This new period is marked by the necessity of cooperation and regional ownership. In that regard, Türkiye, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region are the areas most affected by any development in Syria. We face similar challenges. I believe Iraq's role as a whole, not only the Kurdistan Region, will be much more important than ever after the developments in Syria. We should focus our efforts on maintaining political stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. Also the PKK and DEASH should be prevented from exploiting the developments on the ground.

KC: As the top diplomat representing Türkiye in the Kurdistan Region, what is your message to your host community?

ET: You'll regret asking this question because I cannot confine myself to a short answer. I am the chief of a diplomatic mission for the first time in my diplomatic career, and Erbil is such an important city from various angles. This is true not only for foreign policy, but also in cultural and political fields as well. It is an immensely important post, and I am immensely honored that I was picked up for the job.

Speaking personally, Erbil has a special place in my heart because, when I was a young diplomat in Baghdad, I had the privilege and responsibility of helping our first Consul General open this consulate for the first time. I even had to put bricks and paint walls inside the office when there was shortage of workers.

In that period, I was a frequent visitor



■ Turkish Consul General Erman Topçu during a project site visit in Erbil.



■ Turkish Consul General Erman Topçu planting a tree during a campaign supplied with 40,600 saplings from Diyarbakir.

to Erbil – not only for the Consulate business but also accompanying my Ambassador. Here is a personal story that maybe I'm sharing for the first time publicly. In one of those visits with my Ambassador, I was introduced to Kak Masoud, who, after learning that I was a newcomer to the diplomacy, told me "inshallah you will one day come to Erbil as Consul General!". Now, I am here as the fifth Consul General of Türkiye, and this is the 15th year of our embassy. We are thinking about an event to commemorate our 15 years in Erbil.

wife, 'why don't you come to Erbil?' She happily accepted and stayed here for three days, and it was a delightful experience. Now, after 14 years, we are here in Erbil as a family. We feel really embraced by the city and the people. We feel the affection.

In both our personal and professional life in Erbil, however, that is a sort of challenge – we have to live up to that affection and that expectation when it comes to fostering people-to-people and official relations. That's why I believe – as a diplomat – that there is one side of the story that we need to invest more in: the cultural side.



■ Turkish Consul General Erman Topçu visiting Male Arami Rehabilitation Center/Nursing Home in Erbil.

We have perfect relations on the political level. As I said, there is constant contact at the highest level. Whenever a politician from the KRI travels to Türkiye, there is a high-level reception. The economic side of the story, as I said, is also a success. There have been ups and downs, but things have always been trending

There is another side of the story, which is rather personal. I got married with my wife Esin in August 2009 and right after our honeymoon, started my duty in Baghdad. Next year, on the eve of our first wedding anniversary, we were talking with each other how to plan it and I suggested to my

In fact, any Turkish citizen and diplomat serving in Erbil quickly recognizes and feels the huge cultural and personal affection that the people show us.

upward. The security cooperation is excellent and will grow even stronger. What is lagging is the cultural side. People have this interaction, but at the state level, on the Turkish side, we

need to be more involved and active, which will be the priority in 2025.

There are two sides of the story. On the one hand, there is a very talented, active, and vibrant expat community from Türkiye here who are present in every walks of life, but need to be unified under one platform because most of them don't know each other.

On the other hand, from the local population's side -be it Kurdish, Turkmen or any other part of the society there is this expectation to show that Türkiye is present from a cultural perspective in Erbil. That's why we are going to establish a platform this year for Turkish citizens living in Erbil, where individuals involved in all sectors will be invited. This platform will be an important venue for cultural activities.

I believe 2025 will be a very dynamic year. If the regional context, security, and political situation allow it, then

we will have many concerts, exhibitions, and other cultural activities, which will show people here the Türkiye that they love and respect. Other than that, we are very happy that this cultural exchange is ongoing. We have a great number of visitors from



■ Turkish Consul General Erman Topçu speaking during Turkish Republic Day ceremony in Erbil (Oct. 29, 2024).

the Kurdistan Region in Türkiye as tourists. In this regard, I want to underline that if you look at Türkiye's geographical position, we are at the cen-

ter of many crises, wars and conflicts that shape global geopolitical context. In between all the turmoil at the regional level, Türkiye is keeping its doors open. And I believe that this is something unique that only Türkiye can do. As in the past, our borders are always open. We are even further facilitating the movement of people; for example, recently we abolished visas for people above 50 and under 15, which has further encouraged people to visit Türkiye.

As this exchange and human interaction continues, we, from the side of the consulate, must build on that through our activities here in Erbil. While following the political, economic, and security files, we will focus more on the cultural side of relations.

That was a long answer but given sincerely. And I would like to heartily thank *Kurdistan Chronicle* for giving me this opportunity. ●

Dutch Defense Minister Sees Continued Need for Military in Iraq



Wladimir van Wilgenburg

is a seasoned reporter and analyst who specializes in Kurdish affairs, and holds a Master's degree in Kurdish studies from Exeter University, UK.

Dutch Minister of Defense Ruben Brekelmans visited the Kurdistan Region on December 23 after meeting with officials in Baghdad. In an exclusive interview with *Kurdistan Chronicle*, he highlighted his country's strong cooperation with the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces and emphasized the need for Dutch military advisors to remain in Kurdistan.

Appreciation for the *peshmerga*

During his visit, Minister Brekelmans met with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani to discuss the future of the anti-ISIS mission in Iraq and *peshmerga* reform. Dutch military advisors have supported the Kurdish *peshmerga* for several years in the fight against ISIS.

"There was a very strong cooperation there and, as President Nechirvan Barzani said, the fight against ISIS led to a lot of casualties from the *peshmerga* side, so they sacrificed a lot. They took a very prominent role in fighting ISIS, and we were very happy that we could support them in this," Minister Brekelmans said.

"It was very impressive that Iraq and the *peshmerga* were able to defeat ISIS. They are now in a completely different state than they were 10 years ago, or even six years ago, but it is important that we keep combatting ISIS because there are still ISIS cells, and many ISIS members are imprisoned in Syria," he added.

"We need to make sure that those ISIS fighters do not escape, because then they would pose a serious security risk," he underlined.

Dutch support for *peshmerga* reform

The Netherlands is part of the Multinational Advisory Group, which consists of a number of countries that support the *peshmerga* reform program with advisors in the Kurdistan Region.

"We've discussed this broader picture, including how the different actors are now trying to engage with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria and what the approach should be. We also discussed *peshmerga* reform, and President Nechirvan Barzani expressed appreciation for what the Netherlands is doing," he added.

Peshmerga troops are split between political factions, with 70 units under the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and 80 units under the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The goal of the *peshmerga* reform project is to unite these units as Regional Guard Brigades under the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs by 2026.

"President Nechirvan Barzani said that they are making progress in this process. Some things are not going as fast as we would like, but he was very transparent about this. Sometimes things go slowly, but there is also a clear commitment from



Ruben Brekelmans, Minister of Defense of the Netherlands



Photo: Saffin Hamid

■ Peshmerga officers during a graduation ceremony in the Kurdistan Region.

both sides to make progress in integrating the 70s and 80s,” Minister Brekelmans added.

Minister Brekelmans visited the Dutch troops in the Kurdistan Region in December just before the Christmas and New Year holidays. “I wanted to show my appreciation for everything that they are doing.”

“I have seen with my own eyes the important work our advisors are doing. Everyone I spoke to, including Iraq’s Minister of Defense and Minister of Foreign Affairs, all expressed how important the work we are doing is. It is now even more essential given what is happening in Syria,” he said.

On December 22, Minister Brekel-

“**The United States is providing a lot of the fighting capabilities, as well as a lot of strategic resources**”

mans met with top Iraqi officials and the commander of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS.

In September, the United States and the Iraqi government announced that the coalition mission in Iraq will end

by September 2025 and transition to bilateral security partnerships.

“It was announced that the anti-ISIS coalition will end in Iraq, or at least it will scale down. There are now discussions on whether that should take place or not,” he said.

“If tensions in Syria increase, it might enable ISIS to strengthen its position in Syria. Then they could cross the border into Iraq and create significant instability.”

Dutch military presence important

“I think it’s important to stay active here in the Kurdistan Region. Because we have been here for such a

long time, we do have a strong network and a deep understanding of the dynamics, which are quite complicated,” Minister Brekelmans told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

He emphasized that, although there are only a few Dutch military advisors left in the Kurdistan Region, “we can still have significant value. President Nechirvan Barzani just expressed to me that he very much appreciates what we have done over the years. Even with a small number of people, we can have a relevant impact.”

Last year, the Dutch military sent 145 soldiers to Baghdad for the NATO mission and assumed its command

“**It is very likely that the NATO mission will continue**”

in May. Meanwhile, the 120 Dutch troops previously stationed in Erbil have departed, leaving five advisors in the Kurdistan Region.

“There will be periods of time with a bit more or fewer people, but it is

important that we maintain the network, partnerships, and even friendships that we have built up over the years,” he added.

He also said that, in general, Dutch soldiers are happy with their work in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region and the facilities that are provided to them. “They are also happy with the way they work with international partners, such as the United States and Germany.”

Risk of turmoil in Syria

Minister Brekelmans warned that the turmoil in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime could impact Iraq.



■ An Army aircrewman stands on the edge of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter during a transit from Baghdad International Airport to Besmaya Range Complex, Iraq, (April 21, 2016).

Photo: Dominique A. Pinero



Photo: Safin Hamid

■ Peshmerga officers during a graduation ceremony in the Kurdistan Region.

“This shows the importance of the work we are doing to maintain a level of stability and security here in Iraq.”

He added that a military presence in Iraq could take different shapes and forms. “I understand as a minister that sometimes the political logic in an election year can be different than long-term military logic,” he said. “But I do think that there is still a need for a military presence in Iraq, because the turmoil in Syria could potentially spill over into Iraq.”

Furthermore, he said that it remains important to have an international military presence in Iraq. “Of course, the United States is providing a lot of the fighting capabilities, as well as a lot of strategic resources. It is important that the international community is active here and works closely with the United States,” he added.

“I think the U.S. military personnel here are very aware of how important their presence is. I’m very curious what decisions are going to be made,

but I can imagine that some will be different than a few weeks ago when the situation in Syria was different.”

Minister Brekkelmans also revealed that the Netherlands is working on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Iraq. “The MOU is very broad; it is not only about security, but also about economic development, migration, and humanitarian assistance,” he said.

“It only shows that what we are doing here helps to maintain a level of stability and security, to make sure that ISIS does not reemerge, and to make sure that Iraq remains stable so we do not have another huge wave of refugees. Migration does not only impact Iraq, but it also impacts the broader region and the security of Europe and the Netherlands. I think what we are doing now is in everyone’s interest.”

“If our military wants to be active

here, there needs to be a clear mandate and clear framework,” he added. “It is very likely that the NATO mission will continue, but at the moment it could be affected because there is a close interconnection within the anti-ISIS coalition.”

On December 18, the Dutch parliament approved the extension of the NATO mission of Dutch soldiers in Iraq for another six months. “I think that was very important, but it is also

now interesting for me to see with my own eyes what the security situation is here, as well as the impact of what is happening in Syria.”

“It’s important that in the short term there is more clarity on how the anti-ISIS coalition mission is going to continue, because it is also affecting how the NATO mission can continue. We as the Netherlands will definitely stay committed here – but in what way, we need to see in the future.” ●

The Role of the Kurds in Post-Assad Syria



Shamal Abdulla

is a journalist with 18 years of experience in the field. He has held a number of prestigious positions, including news director at Kurdistan 24 and the editor-in-chief of BasNews.

With the fall of Bashar al-Assad on December 8, 2024, new hope has arisen for the Kurdish people in Syria. Historically, Kurdistan, which was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, was divided into the states of Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye after World War I under the framework established by the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between the British and French.

all nations – Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Persians alike. But it was the Kurds who suffered the greatest oppression and setbacks.”

President Barzani continued, reflecting on the long struggle of the Kurdish people: “For 100 years, the existence of the Kurdish nation was denied. The Kurds resisted, but neither was their existence acknowledged nor could they change this reality. What does this tell us?” He urged,

“

Although certain regional actors perceive the influence of Syrian Kurds as a threat, it is crucial for the Syrian Kurds to strengthen their ties with the Kurdistan Region and foster unity within the evolving political landscape

”

For over a century, the Kurds have fought for their rights, both within each country and across border, using methods ranging from guerrilla warfare to civil and cultural resistance. President Masoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and a central figure in the Kurdistan Region for over fifty years, emphasized at the American University of Kurdistan in November 2024 that “after World War I, the re-division of the region was imposed on

“We must think about a peaceful and respectful solution – a brotherly approach, rooted in mutual respect and acceptance, is the right way forward.”

A new era for Syria

Following Assad’s downfall, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has expressed hopes for peace and stability in Syria, stressing that any future solution



Photo: Hussein Malla / AP

A broken bust of Hafiz al-Assad is stepped on by a rebel fighter after the fall of the Assad regime.

should benefit all of Syria's diverse communities and promote coexistence, peace, and stability.

In a video message, Syria's de facto leader Ahmad al-Sharaa affirmed that "the Kurds are part of our country and have faced oppression just like us. With the regime gone, they will receive their rights according to the law. We hope a new future begins for the Kurdish people."

President Barzani welcomed this statement, declaring that "we welcome this vision for the Kurds and the future of Syria. This is an opportunity to correct historical wrongs done to the Kurdish people in Syria." He added, "This view will help build a stronger Syria, and all communities – Kurds, Arabs, and others – should seize this opportunity to participate in the establishment of a stable, free, and democratic Syria."

The Kurdish population in Syria

Kurds are Syria's second-largest ethnic group, constituting roughly 10% of the population. They are primarily located in the Al-Hasakah and Aleppo governorates, but are also spread across parts of the Latakia and Damascus governorates and the Kurd Mountains.

Throughout the 20th century, after the creation of the Syrian states by Western colonial powers, Kurds faced systemic oppression, including Arabization policies that aimed to displace Kurds and change the demographic makeup of the country. Kurdish language was banned in schools, and many Kurds were stripped of Syrian citizenship, effectively rendering them stateless.

The Kurds have long struggled for their rights, with significant uprisings like those in Qamishli in 2004 being violently suppressed. Amid the 2011 uprisings and the subsequent Syrian revolution, Kurds played a pivotal role, managing to control up to 40%

How Syrian Rebels Advanced from North



October 2024: HTS holds small areas near Syria's border with Türkiye.



December 3: HTS takes Aleppo in a few days and then advances south.



December 5: After taking Hama, HTS head towards the city of Homs.



December 7: HTS captures Homs and continues push to Damascus.



December 8: HTS take Damascus and claims victory.



December 10: HTS advances continue to the Mediterranean coast.

Source: Janes, ISW (10 December 19:00, 2024 GMT), via BBC

of the country. The Kurdish forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), were instrumental in the fight against ISIS in coordination

with the international coalition.

However, political freedom was severely restricted under the Kurd-



■ Syrian refugees in Erbil celebrating the fall of Assad.

Photo: Saifin Hamid

ish-led administration in SDF-controlled territories. Many Kurds were forced to flee to the Kurdistan Region due to the lack of political space.

Kurdistan Region's importance

Following Assad's fall, Kurdish politicians and academics in Syria began calling for increased support from the Kurdistan Region, hoping that the region would leverage its diplomatic ties and resources to help consolidate Kurdish rights in Syria. SDF leader Mazloun Abdi expressed hope that "the Kurdistan Region would play a greater role in Western Kurdistan (northeastern Syria) to protect our achievements and secure our unity." Stressing the influential role of President Barzani's support, he hoped that he could "unite Kurdish political forces and secure Kurdish rights while neutralizing external threats."

In response, President Barzani's special representative visited Syria to

meet with SDF commander Abdi. Barzani's representative, Hamid Darbandi, conveyed a message emphasizing the importance of unity among Kurdish parties to address Syria's evolving challenges. Abdi expressed gratitude for this support, noting that only collective efforts could bring stability to the Kurdish people and Syria as a whole.

Subsequent meetings were held between Syria's Kurdish political parties, notably the Kurdish National Council in Syria and the Democratic Union Party, a group with ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party. These discussions were backed by international powers, including the United States and France, to foster Kurdish unity and negotiate with Syria's new leadership. The goal was to secure Kurdish rights and influence the drafting of Syria's future constitution.

Path forward

In a recent meeting in Erbil, Presi-

dent Masoud Barzani hosted Abdi to discuss the current situation in Syria, including the latest security and political developments. Both leaders reiterated that Syrian Kurds must independently shape their future, free from external interference, and through peaceful means. They also agreed on the necessity of unity among Kurdish political forces to build a strong, stable Syria that could prevent future conflicts and ensure the rights of all communities.

Syrian Kurds are now united in their understanding that only through cooperation and unity can they achieve their long-desired rights. Although certain regional actors perceive the influence of Syrian Kurds as a threat, it is crucial for the Syrian Kurds to strengthen their ties with the Kurdistan Region and foster unity within the evolving political landscape. By emphasizing their positive role in regional stability, they aim to contribute to lasting peace and a secure future for all Syrians. ●

The Fifteenth Anniversary of *Kurds for Labour*

Kurdistan Chronicle

On January 14, the UK-based Centre for Kurdish Progress hosted an event in London to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the establishment of Kurds for Labour. The event was attended by various ministers, members of Parliament, lords, and the general supervisor of the Kurdish Diaspora Confederation. “Fifteen years ago, we established Kurds for Labour to ensure that the Kurdish community had a voice in the United Kingdom. Over the years, the community has become more familiar with the British Labour Party. Today, we have grown to 40 councils across London and proudly have a mayor and a member of Parliament, who is also a minister,” Ibrahim Dogus, founder of the Centre for Kurdish Progress, told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Delivering for the people

Councilor Sarbaz Barznji, the former Mayor of Lambeth and Chair of Kurds for Labour, was proud that the Kurdish community played a crucial role to bring back the Labor party to power in July of last year. “We are celebrating the return of the Labour government, which can deliver for the people of this country. We are proud to have played a pivotal role in supporting our candidates across the nation and mobilizing the Kurdish com-

munity to back Labour candidates.” Shifa Barzani, General Supervisor of the Kurdish Diaspora Confederation, congratulated the Labour Party in his speech and provided a brief history of the sacrifices made by Kurds for free-



■ (From left) Ibrahim Dogus, Founder of the Center for Kurdish Progress, Goran Shakhawan, *Kurdistan Chronicle* Reporter, Sarbaz Barznji, Chair of Kurds for Labour.

dom in the Middle East, emphasizing their significant role in defeating ISIS. He urged members of Parliament and the House of Lords present at the event to stand with the Kurdish cause and ask the government to increase support for the Kurds. Additionally, he called for the BBC to include the

Kurdish language in its broadcasts.

Feryal Clark, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for AI and Digital Government, addressed the attendees and emphasized the Kurdish community’s role within the Labour

Photo: Idris Okudaci



“
The Kurdish community is very important across the UK and plays a crucial role in the Labour Party
”

■ Participants of the 15th anniversary of ‘Kurds for Labor.’

Photo: Idris Okudaci

the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). “This relationship can and should be improved. We are committed to ensuring that the Labour Party understands the needs of the thousands of Kurdish families who call the UK home.”

“Kurds for Labour is about giving a strong voice to Kurdish communities within the Labour Party,” she added.

UK-KRG relations

The relationship between the UK

government and the KRG encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation.

Historically, the UK has played a crucial role in the region. At the event, Lord Peter Hain, Member of the House of Lords, highlighted his connection to the Kurdish cause. “When I was a minister in the Middle East for Tony Blair’s government over 20 years ago, the Kurdish people were very much on our minds. We championed Kurdish rights, including political rights, and the government was

very concerned about ensuring that these rights were respected here in London.”

Lord Hain hopes that, in the future, the UK will always stand in solidarity with the Kurdish people, who deserve to have their human and political rights upheld on the global stage. He also discussed the role of the Kurdish community in the UK, noting that “the Kurdish community is very important across the UK and plays a crucial role in the Labour Party.” ●



■ Artifacts from Kurdistan fill the Home of Memories exhibit in Minnesota, including a notebook of poems by Zak and a handmade peshmerga bag, traditional hat, and shoes contributed by Hameed.

Photo: Zakaria Mohammed Amin

The exhibit also highlights the journeys of other Kurdish immigrants. For instance, Meriam Farok arrived with her family in 1991 after their town in the Kurdistan Region was bombed. “We had to leave everything behind,” Meriam recalled. “But we held onto the hope that we would survive.”

Now a nursing assistant in Moorhead, Farok takes pride in contributing to

the community that welcomed her. Her niece, Kawar Farok, is the head of Kurdish American Development Organization in Minnesota.

Another story in the exhibit is that of Hashim Goran, who arrived in Minnesota in 2012 after years of working as an interpreter for U.S. forces in Iraq. Today, Goran works as a career counselor, helping other immigrants

navigate the challenges of starting over in a new country. “Leaving behind everything was hard, but we had to find safety,” he said. “Minnesota became our new home.”

Another unique story is that of Zak Amin, a Kurdish immigrant who arrived in 2015, and now teaches English and Kurdish heritage classes at Moorhead High School, ensuring

that young Kurdish students stay connected to their roots. His dedication to empowering Kurdish youth through education earned him the 2024 Minnesota Education Human Rights Award.

Artifacts from Kurdistan brought by the Kurdish families that have built new lives in Minnesota fill the “Home of Memories” exhibit. Among them

ensuring that these cultural practices remain alive in the diaspora. Meanwhile, Amedy’s passion for human rights and cultural awareness earned her recognition as the YWCA Women of the Year for Fargo-Moorhead.

At the event’s opening reception, Alemadi reflected on his journey

“It is an opportunity to understand the lives of Kurdish Minnesotans – the struggles they have faced, the culture they have preserved, and the contributions they have made to their new home in the United States”

is a notebook filled with poems written by Amin during his time in Kurdistan. Alemadi, for his part, contributed a handmade bag once used by *peshmerga* fighters, along with a traditional Kurdish hat and shoes. These simple yet powerful items tell the story of a people who have carried their culture with them, even in the face of displacement.

Little Kurdistan

Another prominent figure in Moorhead’s Kurdish community is Siham Amedy, chair of the Moorhead Human Rights Commission. Raised in Minnesota but deeply connected to her Kurdish roots, Amedy is committed to preserving Kurdish culture and sharing it with the broader public. Through her videography projects, she has documented Kurdish traditions such as grape leaf picking for *yaprakh*, the Kurdish version of stuffed grape leaves,

from a young *peshmerga* to becoming the first Kurdish person to settle in Minnesota. Now retired, he is proud of the community that has grown around him. “I didn’t know what my life would be like when I first came here,” he said. “But now, my children and grandchildren are thriving in this new home.”

Marcus Krieger, a historian with the Clay County Historical Society, reflected on the broader impact of the Kurdish community in Moorhead. “This town has always been a place where immigrants came to build a new life. First, it was Norwegians, and now it is Kurds who are adding to the fabric of this community,” he said, affectionately dubbing Moorhead the “Little Kurdistan” of Minnesota.

The exhibit, which runs until June 2025, is more than just a collection of photos and stories. It is an opportunity to understand the lives of Kurdish Minnesotans – the struggles they have faced, the culture they have preserved, and the contributions they have made to their new home in the United States. Through events like this, the story of Moorhead’s Kurdish community continues to be told, ensuring that future generations will remember the people who helped make it what it is today. ●

Drug Epidemic in Iraq and Beyond



Rawisht Rasheed

is an advisor at Barzani Charity Foundation in the Kurdistan Region.

Drug addiction and its associated challenges represent a sensitive and alarming issue worldwide. Recent findings from the World Drug Report, published in June 2024 by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), reveal deeply concerning statistics. In 2022, the estimated global number of drug users reached nearly 300 million – one in 18 people – marking a 20% increase over the past decade. These figures reflect only formally recorded data, leaving the unreported numbers potentially much higher.

According to the 2022 data, 64 million individuals globally were severely affected by drug addiction and its consequences. Disturbingly, only one in 11 affected individuals received treatment, meaning over 90% of addicts worldwide remained untreated. This alarming gap underscores a devastating reality: countless lives are trapped in the shadow of addiction, with little hope for recovery without substantial intervention.

Iraq: a nation at a crossroad

Iraq emerges as a particularly vulnerable region in the global drug crisis. The UNODC's 2024 report *Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East* identifies Iraq as a critical hub due to its geographical location and socio-political instability. These factors have made Iraq a key transit point for drug trafficking in the Middle East, linking Asia, Africa,

and Europe through three main routes: northern, central, and southern.

Additionally, the presence of organized crime networks in Iraq and neighboring countries exacerbates the crisis. These groups leverage vast financial resources to facilitate drug production, trafficking, and sales, further deepening the problem. Alarming evidence of drug production within Iraq intensifies the severity of the situation, leaving countless families devastated by the far-reaching impacts of this epidemic.

The data paints a grim picture: Iraq and Kurdistan are facing a crisis with consequences potentially more devastating than war. This epidemic, driven by dark networks and destructive forces, demands immediate and comprehensive action. Unfortunately, Iraq's existing services for addressing drug addiction, detoxification, and rehabilitation are limited and underfunded. Thus, the establishment of specialized awareness and rehabilitation centers has become an urgent necessity.

First drug awareness and rehabilitation center in Kurdistan

In response to this crisis, the Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF), in collaboration with U.S.-based LDS Charities, has taken a significant step by laying the cornerstone of the first drug awareness and rehabilitation center in the Kurdistan

Region. Supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government, this center aims to be a key resource in combating drug addiction, providing a ray of hope for those affected by addiction. However, the task ahead is far from easy and demands substantial effort and resources.

The partnership between BCF and LDS Charities has been a cornerstone of this initiative. Renowned for their unwavering dedication and impactful

the center is not just a facility but a sanctuary of hope and transformation.

The three pillars of rehabilitation

Addressing drug addiction requires a multi-phase approach, integrating community engagement, medical intervention, and societal reintegration:

1. Awareness Phase: This phase seeks to awaken a collective under-

societal shift so that the dangers of drug addiction are universally understood and collectively resisted.

2. Detoxification Phase: This phase is a battle against the physical and psychological chains of addiction. By leveraging local expertise and collaborating with world-class centers, this phase employs meticulous medical practices to cleanse the body of toxins. At the same time, it addresses the deep-seated emotional scars caused by



Prime Minister Masrour Barzani laying the foundation stone for a drug rehabilitation center in Erbil (November 26, 2024).

humanitarian efforts, LDS Charities has consistently provided support to vulnerable communities in the Kurdistan Region and the broader Middle East. Their expertise, resources, and commitment have not only enhanced the scope of this project, but also demonstrated the power of collaborative efforts in addressing complex challenges like drug addiction. Their compassionate approach ensures that

standing of the devastating impact of drug addiction. It involves a strategic collaboration of educators, community leaders, writers, media professionals, religious figures, artists, and athletes. Through inspiring educational seminars, evocative media campaigns, cultural and sports events, and grassroots advocacy, the awareness phase aims to ignite a sense of urgency and responsibility. The goal is to create a

addiction. The detoxification phase is rigorous and often heart-wrenching, as individuals confront the darkest parts of their journey. Yet, it is also filled with resilience and strength, with even the smallest step toward recovery a monumental victory.

3. Reintegration Phase: Reintegration is where hope takes tangible form. This phase focuses on restor-

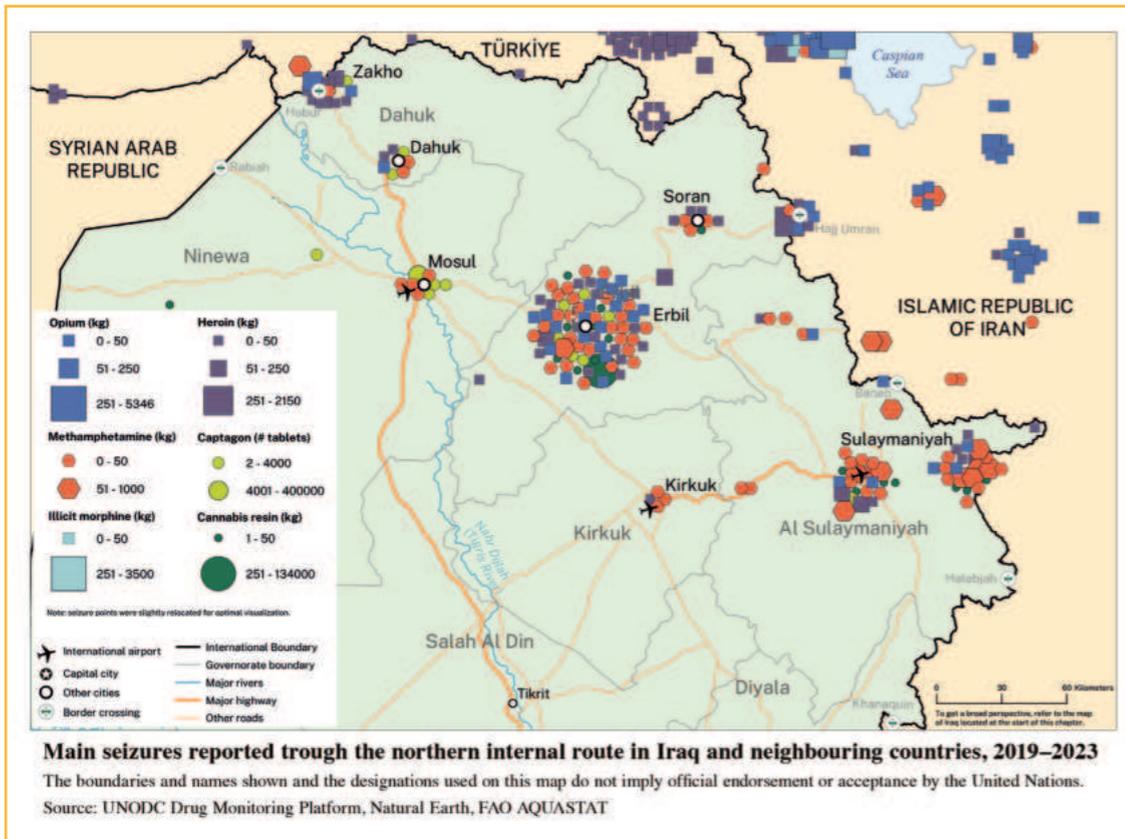
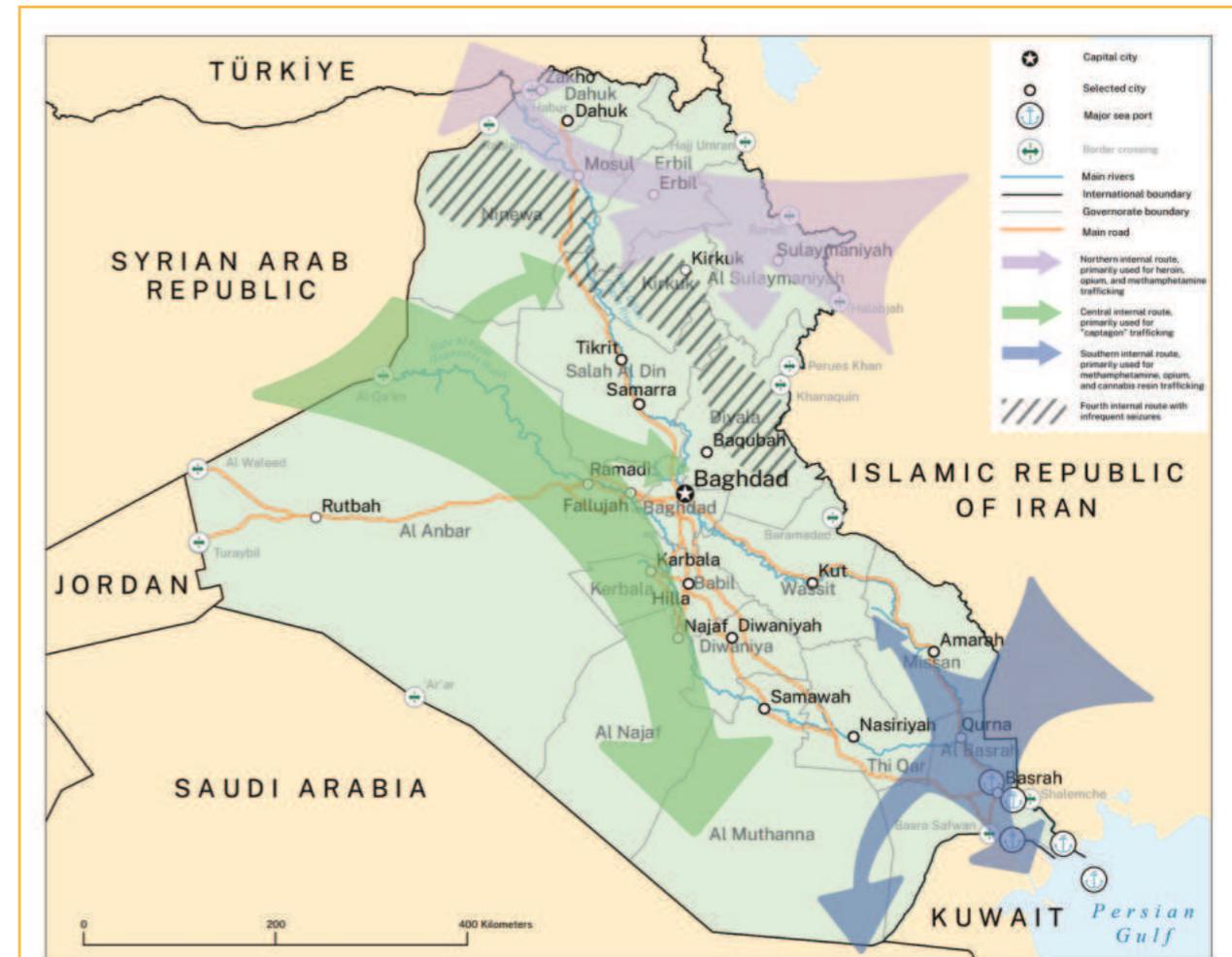


Photo: Safin Hamid

Drugs seized and destroyed by the Kurdistan Region anti-narcotics department.



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Sources: UNAMI, Natural Earth, FAO AQUASTAT. Also based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, including from the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

ing individuals to the fabric of society, providing them with the tools and opportunities to rebuild their lives. Through ongoing awareness campaigns, family involvement, and economic empowerment programs, the reintegration phase transforms recovery into a sustainable reality. It is a testament to the power of second chances, emphasizing that every life, no matter how fractured, holds the potential for renewal.

A healthier and more resilient society

The BCF's mission focuses on creating hope and laying the foundation for a brighter future. By collaborating with partners and utilizing the expertise of organizations like LDS Charities, the BCF aims to build a healthier and more resilient society. The newly established drug awareness and rehabilitation center will serve as a lighthouse, guiding individuals out of the storm of addiction and reminding them that they are never alone in their struggle.

The fight against drug addiction in Iraq and beyond is complex and multifaceted. It requires coordinated efforts, robust resources, and unwavering commitment. As the BCF and its partners pave the way forward, the hope is to create a safe, stable, and healthy society for future generations.

Together, let us work toward a world free from the shackles of addiction, where every individual can reclaim their dignity and thrive in the light of hope. ●

Swidler's Search for Understanding Through Dialogue



Basil Al-Khatib

is an Iraqi journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.

Born in the United States in 1929 to an immigrant family of Ukrainian and Russian origin, Professor Leonard Swidler experienced religious and racial discrimination and oppression throughout his life. Despite this, he channeled his upbringing into a lifelong devotion to interfaith dialogue, seeking for ways to heal the rift between Catholics and Protestants.

Professor Emeritus of Catholic Thought and Interfaith Dialogue at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Swidler recently sat down with *Kurdistan Chronicle* to discuss a wide range of issues relating to his life's work, Kurdistan, and the ongoing importance of dialogue. "No one knows everything," he emphasizes. "Therefore, there is an urgent need for dialogue to expand our knowledge and understanding of life and others."

A life of the mind, and the heart

Now considered a global theologian, Swidler started his educational journey in a traditional path – engineering – before abandoning after two years of studying philosophy and becoming a Catholic preacher. Thereafter, he completed a master's degree and decided to specialize in the study of Catholic thought and history at the University of Tübingen and the University of Munich in Germany. He then went on to obtain a doctoral degree in history from the University of Wisconsin in 1961.

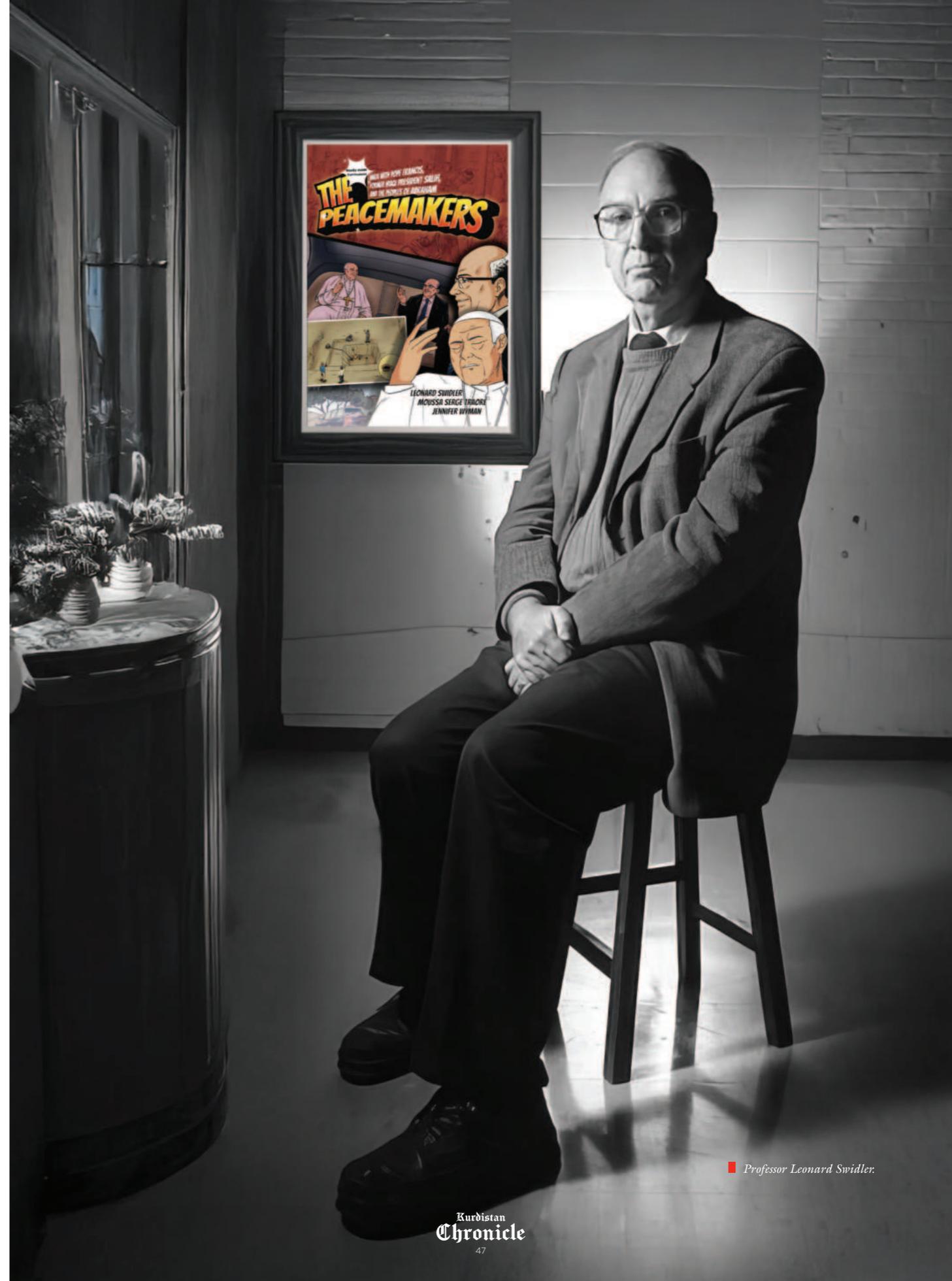
“

Swidler has been invited to establish a Dialogue Institute branch at the University of Sulaymaniyah, which will aim to foster interfaith dialogue among international scholars

”

In 1966, he became a professor of Catholic thought and interfaith dialogue at Temple and founded a new department concerned with interfaith dialogue. It included scholars of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam – including the Palestinian thinker Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986), who specialized in comparative religions – and was the first time that a state government in the United States had supported a university in establishing such a department.

The department served as a springboard for Swidler to devote his life to researching ways to heal the rift between Catholics and Protestants. He later expanded this interest into trying to bring religions clos-



Professor Leonard Swidler.

■ Professor Leonard Swidler (right) pictured during an interview with Kurdistan Chronicle



er together and spread knowledge about them, nurturing a culture of dialogue and tolerance among people.

These efforts ultimately led Swidler to establish the Dialogue Institute at Temple in 1978, which sought to promote understanding between followers of different religions and of different cultures. Swidler says that the institute was built on the belief that dialogue “is the best way for people to understand each other and the best means to resolve conflicts and problems around the world.”

The Dialogue Institute has since carried its message to many countries across Asia, Europe, and the United States, including but not limited to Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia. Recently, its mission has expanded to the Kurdistan



cognitive picture not only about them, but also about the world we live in and even the universe.”

Swidler explains that dialogue “contributes to solving puzzles and mysteries, reducing our fear of the unknown, and communicating with others to find common denominators that allow everyone to live in peace and harmony.”

Regarding the conflict between religions, especially Islam and Christianity, Swidler believes that “the history of more than a thousand years of wars between Christian empires and Islamic countries has created an entrenched hostility between the two parties.”

“This is a natural tendency across religious conflicts, for instance in the Catholic view of the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther in the 16th century or even between Christian or Islamic sects and groups,” he adds, noting that “the most balanced view of Islam did not appear until the middle of the 20th century, when the activity of the dialogue movement began to rise. Thus, there are now many balanced Christian viewpoints towards Islam.”

Region via the University of Sulaymaniyah, where Swidler was invited to give lectures at the College of Islamic Sciences during the 2023-2024 academic year.

Breaking down the walls of ignorance and fanaticism

Dialogue is a Greek word that “means thinking and talking together,” Swidler notes. “I found that I wanted to talk to others who have beliefs different from my own so that I could understand their ideas and perceptions and form a better and broader

Swidler acknowledges that there are Muslims who “deliberately use Islam as

a tool for murder and destruction, even though the vast majority of Muslims say that this is incompatible with Islam and that non-Muslims who know nothing about Islam realize that Islam, like all religions, is committed to peace.”

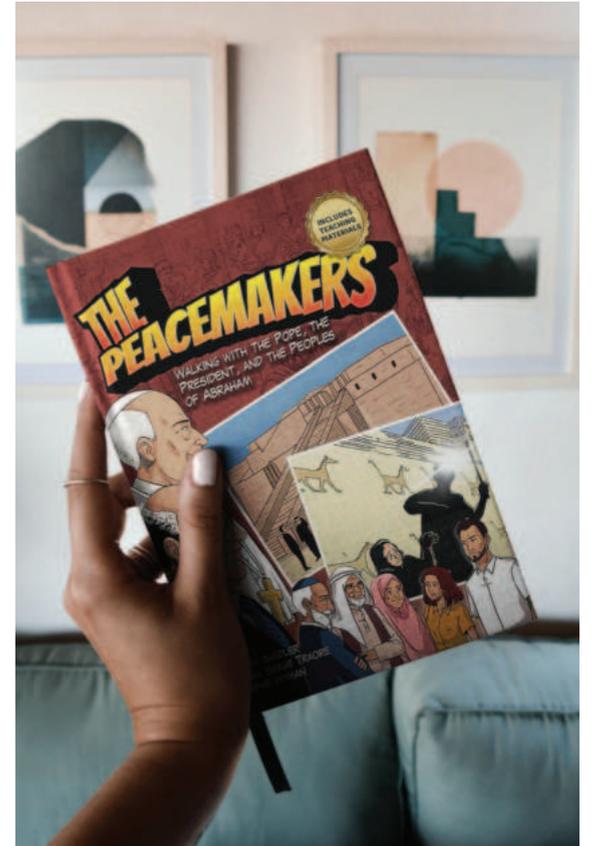
To confront these beliefs, Swidler argues that we need to make greater efforts to learn candidly about Islam. He believes that this can be explained through new and creative means of communication and dialogue, such as blogs and social networks. He also underscores that Christians and non-Muslims have similar responsibilities to introduce their ideas and beliefs, and this will only be achieved through in-depth and open dialogue.

The interfaith scholar also calls on Muslims to loudly and consistently denounce the murder and violence practiced by some in the name of Islam and to consider these acts a betrayal of the faith. He also states that Muslims must “modernize the teaching of Islam to their audiences and focus on their common humanity with non-Muslims, especially since followers of the Christian and Jewish religions believe in one God.”

He believes that, alongside dialogue, openness to followers of other religions and even those who have no religion can enhance understanding through emphasis on the significance of mutual respect and cooperation on both individual and communal levels.

Swidler, whose determination and memory remain firm after years of service and hard work, stresses that “there are more things that unite religions than those that divide them.” Interfaith dialogue, he adds, can contribute to the strengthening of the basic unity of the human family through valuing “equality, the sanctity of the human being, the value of human society, love, self-denial, compassion, strength of spirit, goodness, and advocacy of the poor and oppressed. Finally, it plays a positive role in tearing down the walls of fanaticism and ignorance between Muslims and non-Muslims.”

Interfaith dialogue necessitates a paradigm shift from rhetorical exchanges to a genuine pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Effective dialogue requires in-depth familiarity with diverse religious traditions, fostering mutual comprehension and transformative growth. Moreover, profound religious understanding inherently reveals the intrinsic unity of humanity. This concept resonates with esteemed thinkers, including Sufi philosophers like Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922) and Ibn al-Arabi (1164-1240), who posited the universality of love. Erwin Laszlo (1932), author of the quantum consciousness theory, has also elaborated on this notion, advocating unconditional love towards all humanity.



■ Professor Leonard Swidler’s book titled *The Peacemakers: Walking with the Pope, the President, and the Peoples of Abraham*

Kurdistan’s future

Swidler expressed optimism regarding the Kurdistan Region’s future, noting the region’s remarkable progress in various sectors, akin to China’s achievements in recent years despite Western economic pressures. However, he emphasized that Baghdad’s constraints have hindered Kurdistan’s potential.

Reflecting his growing awareness of the challenges that the Kurdistan Region faces and familiarity with the Middle East, Swidler has been invited to establish a Dialogue Institute branch at the University of Sulaymaniyah, which will aim to foster interfaith dialogue among international scholars. The proposal is currently under review by the Kurdistan Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Swidler’s prolific career boasts over 100 books and 200 research papers. Notably, he facilitated the visit of five Halabja chemical bombing survivors to the White House and U.S. Congress in 2013, marking the 25th anniversary of the tragedy. His latest publication, *The Peacemakers: Walking with the Pope, the President, and the Peoples of Abraham*, explores Pope Francis’ 2021 visit to Iraq. ●

A Pioneer in Firefighting Vehicles



Hemin Baban

is a Kurdish journalist who has worked for a number of local and international media institutions.

In a development that reflects the growing industrial development of the Kurdistan Region, Dusara Company in Erbil has emerged as a pioneer in the field of manufacturing fire-fighting vehicles. This achievement, which was accomplished by the hands and minds of competent Kurdish engineers, is helping to secure a bright future for a promising local industry.

Established in 1977, Dusara pivoted to manufacturing fire engines in 2017 following decades of experience in the field of agricultural equipment. The company has since manufactured 20 fire engines, reflecting its ability to adapt to market requirements and develop local capabilities.

In an exclusive interview with *Kurdistan in Arabic* magazine, CEO Mariwan Faiq Kareem revealed the company's ambitions to go beyond local markets. He seeks to expand production and increase the variety of the company's production lines to export these vehicles outside the borders of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, provided that the necessary support is obtained from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government of Iraq.

Dusara's vehicles meet international standards and are inspired by Austrian and German models, with "a focus on safety and security elements," according to Kareem. The importance of this local industry is highlighted by its ability, as Kareem says, to "compete with imported products in terms of quality and price, as their prices

are 30% to 40% lower than their imported counterparts."

Production of each vehicle takes three months, with their prices ranging between \$170,000 and \$260,000, depending on the specifications required. This price difference reflects the company's flexibility in meeting different customers' needs.

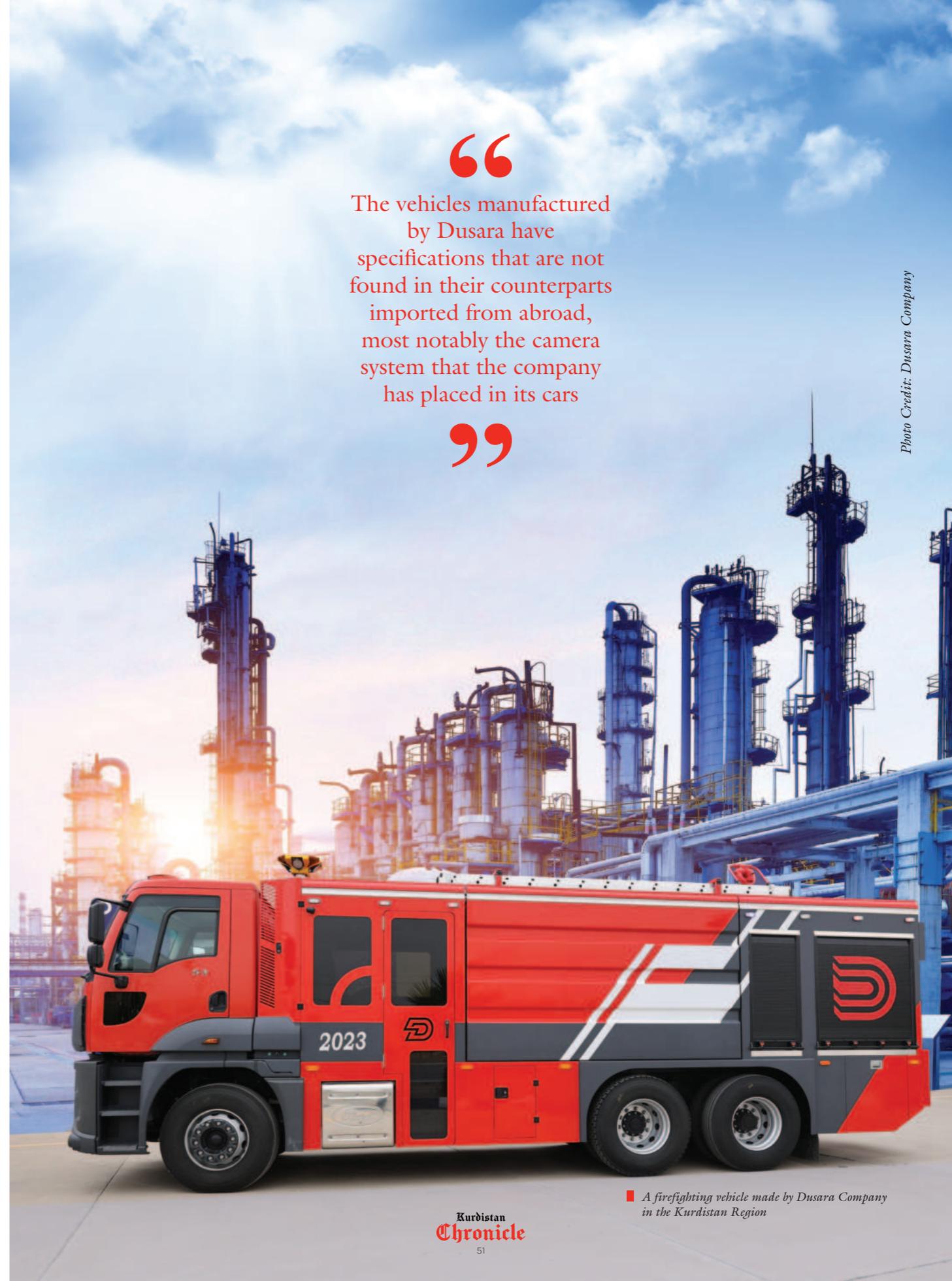
International ambitions

Dusara Company in Erbil continues its pioneering journey in the manufacture of firefighting vehicles, looking forward to broader horizons beyond the borders of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. In this context, Kareem reveals ambitious plans for the future.

"We are working on studying and researching the addition of other production lines in the future, and this is within the local company's plan," he explains.

Karim emphasizes the quality of the company's products, noting that "the durability of the locally manufactured wheel is comparable to the imported one." He sees this as an opportunity for regional and federal governments to contract with the company, which saves time and money and keeps funds within the country.

Dusara is distinguished through its commitment to post-sales service, as it follows up on the performance of its vehicles sold to non-governmental organizations. The company has not received any negative reports from customers, which reinforces



“The vehicles manufactured by Dusara have specifications that are not found in their counterparts imported from abroad, most notably the camera system that the company has placed in its cars

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Photo Credit: Dusara Company

es its confidence in the quality of its products. Its experience, moreover, has extended to include the maintenance of other brands of firefighting vehicles used by government institutions, including those for which the original supplier companies could not provide solutions.

“The company’s engineers and experts have repaired several vehicles imported from neighboring countries and even European countries on behalf of governmental and non-governmental organizations after the supplying companies did not respond

to the buyers’ calls and communications,” Kareem explains with pride. This underscores the disadvantages of importing vehicles, especially when a high-caliber local alternative exists.

Challenges

Despite the successes achieved, the company has also faced challenges in expanding its business. It has received several delegations from federal government institutions to view the manufactured vehicles, but the resulting contracts are still postponed. The KRG has also spoken with the

company about producing 40 vehicles, but the agreement has yet to be completed.

The company’s consulting engineer Zeyad Baban highlights the diversity of the company’s products. “We manufacture water tanks with a capacity from 6,000 liters to more than 16,000 liters, with foam and powder tanks and hose lengths of up to 80 meters.” He adds that the vehicles are equipped with “a cabin for equipment, firefighting equipment, ladders, water pumps, various electrical devices, a cockpit, and a special place

for civil defense personnel.”

“After signing a contract, we order and import the vehicle frame according to the requests of the contracting party from countries such as Germany, the United States, the UK, and China,” Baban explains. “The vehicles manufactured by Dusara have specifications that are not found in their counterparts imported from abroad, most notably the camera system that the company has placed in its cars.”

At the end of the interview, Kareem referred to the requests that the com-

pany has received to move its headquarters outside Iraq, which he has rejected. “We have received offers to move the company’s headquarters outside Iraq with attractive incentives, but we see that serving our city and the people of our country is the basis of our work.”

The success of Dusara represents an inspiring model for local industry in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq and opens up promising possibilities for developing national industries and strengthening the local economy.

Currently, the company is working

on producing five vehicles dedicated to the Al-Abbas Shrine, which confirms the confidence of religious and governmental institutions in the quality of Dusara’s products.

The success of Dusara represents an inspiring model for local industries in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. It opens the door to wide possibilities for local manufacturing in other sectors. This success also underlines the importance of investment in local firms in order to develop their capabilities to keep pace with global developments in various industrial fields. ●

■ Firefighting vehicles made by Dusara Company in the Kurdistan Region.

Photo Credit: Dusara Company



Kurdistan's First Cloud Computing Company



Tariq Al-Taie

is the Chief Marketing Officer at Linkdata.com and a member of the British Chartered Institute of Marketing.

In the heart of Kurdistan, a bold vision took root – a determination to transform underserved and expanding regions into thriving digital hubs. Kurdistan, with its strategic location and a rapidly booming economy, presented immense potential but lacked the infrastructure necessary to support commercial growth. This gap became the driving force for the board members of LinkData.

into a pioneering venture, establishing a Kurdish company that now stands as a regional icon, attracting customers from around the world and driving innovation while advancing the region's digital infrastructure. LinkData.com was created to fill this critical gap, providing the technology and expertise needed to empower businesses and foster economic development.



com, who saw an opportunity to address the region's unmet needs and position Kurdistan as a leader in the digital era.

What began as an idea quickly evolved

LinkData.com holds the distinction of being the first Kurdish company to successfully establish a global presence, earning the trust of clients worldwide. Through relentless dedication to innovation, excel-

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LinkData.com, who saw an opportunity to address the region's unmet needs and position Kurdistan as a leader in the digital era



■ *Linkdata's customer support in one of their offices.*

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lence, and customer satisfaction, the company has become a trailblazer in the cloud computing industry, delivering cutting-edge solutions tailored to the needs of businesses on an international scale.

At the heart of its operations is the first commercial Tier 3 data center in Kurdistan, a facility that adheres to the highest standards of redundancy and

high-performance Virtual Private Servers with unmetered bandwidth, Virtual Dedicated Servers for enhanced flexibility, robust bare-metal servers for dedicated resources, secure private cloud solutions, reliable cloud storage for efficient data management, and backup and disaster recovery services to safeguard critical data. Additional services, such as DNS as a Service, File as a Service, and Firewall as a Service, further demonstrate the company's commitment to comprehensive solutions that streamline operations and drive innovation.



■ An inside look of tier 3 data center in Erbil.

Recognized by leading organizations like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), LinkData.com has achieved another milestone as the first ICANN-accredited domain registrar in the region. This accreditation enables the company to offer the globally recognized .krd domain, symbolizing Kurdish identity on the international stage, alongside popular domains like .com and .co.uk. Local businesses also benefit from high-speed hosting services, supported by expert Kurdish professionals, ensuring a seamless and reliable experience tailored to the community's needs.

reliability. As the pioneering

Tier 3 data center operator in the region, LinkData.com provides exceptional services that cater to businesses locally and globally, ensuring reliability, scalability, and security.

The company's diverse range of cloud services is designed to empower businesses in a cloud-first world. These offerings include fully managed Kubernetes for seamless container orchestration,

LinkData.com's journey exemplifies the power of vision, innovation, and commitment to excellence, solidifying its position as a leader in the digital transformation of Kurdistan and beyond. By bridging the gap in infrastructure and leveraging the region's economic boom, the company is paving the way for a thriving digital future in Kurdistan. ●

The Light Project Addressing Electricity Shortage



Nyaz Taber

is the Chief of Staff to the Erbil Governor, and Lecturer at College of Engineering-Salahaddin University in Erbil.

A country's development relies on the security and delivery of key basic services, with reliable, continuous electricity supply being among the most crucial.

During previous cabinets, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Electricity made genuine attempts to assure such supply, but a solution could not be implemented due to various technical and financial obstacles.

As Director of Electrical Energy Affairs in the Erbil Governorate from 2006 until the end of 2014, I participated in most of the ministry's meetings and technical committees. During this period, the power sector progressed slowly but surely in a step-by-step approach to regulating consumption, assuring supply, and organizing power sales. The first vital step was taken in 2006, when the ministry established a new entity: a power sales department in Erbil with its own sales management software. (Prior to the 1991 Kurdish Uprising, all decisions regarding electricity were made in Baghdad; afterwards, this service was suspended for the cities of the Kurdistan Region.)

Later, efforts were made to train the necessary staff for all specialized sections and units, and each electricity subscriber had their own unique electricity code based on algebraic principles. But we faced a problem: we couldn't create this code for new neighborhoods because it was confidential and connected to Baghdad's pow-

er sales system. Fortunately, I worked out a process for creating new codes, which became the foundation for managing sales and organizing electrical power bills.

Despite many long days and sleepless nights spent trying to organize the distribution of electricity to the residents of the Kurdistan Region, we were, unfortunately, unable to provide continuous 24/7 electricity to all, what has now become the so-called Light Project.

Smart meter project

The ministry then turned to a newer technology that could provide the answers we needed: smart meters. Nevertheless, while the KRG's Eighth Cabinet began to adopt smart meters at the end of its administration, progress was slow, and the project became a meaningless financial burden on the government. However, in July 2019, at the beginning of KRG's Ninth Cabinet, the Ministry of Electricity requested that I manage the smart meter project. All I asked in return was for support from the ministry.

Despite several technical and administrative problems, we successfully managed to install about 25,000 meters in a span of two months, which was an important measurable that the ministry could cite. However, making sure they ran properly and effectively was another matter. For instance, ensuring the meters had internet connectivity with the electricity control room or the software systems controlling



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Erbil's average electricity demand load in December was approximately 2500 megawatts (MW), while the average supply load was approximately 950 MW

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them were important considerations that were not being addressed.

I submitted a special report to the Minister of Electricity outlining all technical and administrative issues with the project, but the report was rejected for unknown reasons. I then conveyed to the ministry that properly working smart meters would solve the Kurdistan Region's electricity supply problem. Judging that the project would fail if the ministry managed it because of a problematic management mentality and operational authority, I explained that I would continue as project manager only if the project were to continue under the authority of the Prime Minister's office. The ministry didn't accept this condition, and I resigned in September 2019.

Four years later, in 2023, it was concluded that the ministry could not manage this project due to a lack of planning.

The future of electrical power

Today, a highly experienced and devoted technical and administrative team from the Office of the Prime Minister manages the Light Project, which aims to provide 24/7 electricity supply to city neighborhoods while phasing out the use of private generators. All the team's members operate with the highest professionalism and work ethic. In coordination with several specified parties, this team is implementing the program to bring 24/7 electricity supply to city neighborhoods while gradually phasing out private generators.

But there is still a long way to go. Erbil's average electricity demand load in December was approximately 2500 megawatts (MW), while the average supply load was



approximately 950 MW. Addressing this 1550-MW gap is a major challenge.

Certainly, providing continuous electricity to one neighborhood reduces the supply for others, but when and how?

In my view, if there is a 24/7 electricity supply to any neighborhood and citizens pay approximately the same amount that they paid previously for both private generators and access to the national electrical grid, more citizens will be conscious of their electricity usage. Step by step, the demand load of neighborhoods with 24/7 electricity supply will decrease, thus reducing the overall electricity demand load, leaving us with what can best be described as the true electricity demand. Citizens will try to limit their energy usage to avoid paying higher bills.

After this phase, the government can implement several other modernization programs to reduce the electricity demand load. For instance, if we examine supply and demand, we discover significant power loss between both sides. This shows that working on reducing demand is more important and practical than increasing supply, as reducing 1 MW of demand equals the addition of 1.5 MW of supply. Therefore, no matter how much work is done to suppress demand, it can never be enough.

My suggestion is that during the KRG's Tenth Cabinet, the Ministry of Electricity's programs and policies should be handed over to the team currently managing the Light Project. In this way, they can benefit from the expertise of engineers, technicians, and devoted employees within the ministry and electricity departments and help us realize the goal of providing 24/7 electricity to our citizens. ●

TRADITION

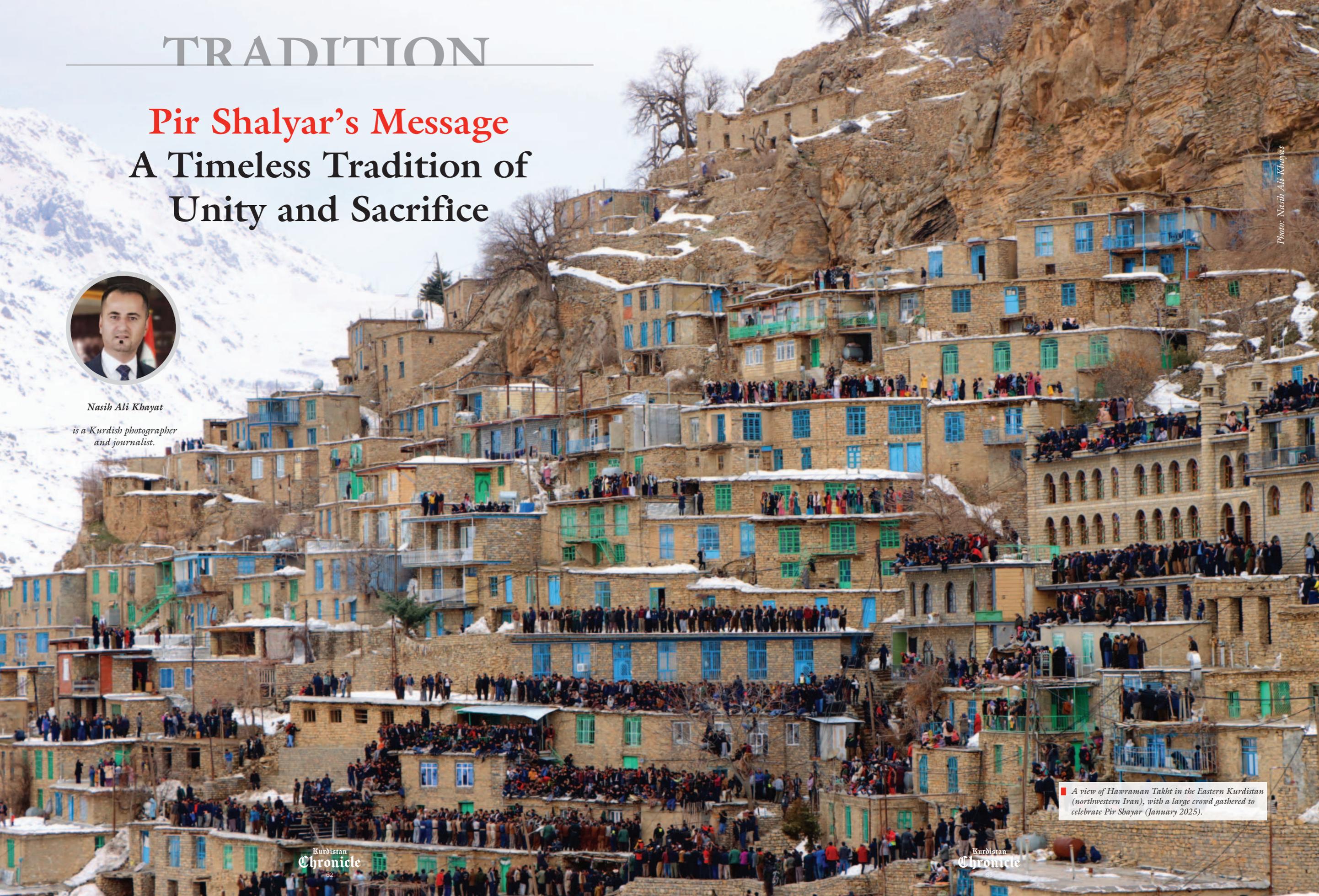
Pir Shalyar's Message A Timeless Tradition of Unity and Sacrifice



Nasib Ali Khayat

*is a Kurdish photographer
and journalist.*

Photo: Nasib Ali Khayat



■ A view of Hawraman Takht in the Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran), with a large crowd gathered to celebrate Pir Shalyar (January 2025).

Pir Shalyar's message is celebrated every year in the Hawraman region with a rich tradition of rituals and gatherings that convey profound lessons about unity, sacrifice, and cultural pride. This tradition, believed to be over 1,000 years old, has its roots in ancient Zoroastrian customs, predating the arrival of Islam in the region. Its longevity underscores its deep cultural and spiritual significance, reflecting the enduring heritage of the Kurdish people in Hawraman. The key elements of this celebration can be broken down as follows:

The day begins with children's joy

The festivities begin at dawn, with children's excitement setting the tone for the day. Their laughter and joy fill the air, symbolizing hope and renewal. Pir Shalyar's message, known as "Klavrochene," emphasizes the importance of the youth in preserving and passing down this tradition. As the purest and most enthusiastic messengers, children ensure that this cultural legacy endures across generations. Indeed, by involving children, the tradition inspires the younger generation to cherish and repeat it annually, securing its place in the future.

Sacrificing animals: a symbol of devotion

Sacrificing animals, often sheep or goat, is a central part of the celebration, symbolizing the community's dedication to higher ideals. Sacrifice teaches participants that achieving great goals often requires letting go of personal possessions and signifies valuing the collective good and prioritizing long-term prosperity over individual gains. This act is a reminder of the community's resilience and their commitment to building an ideal life and civilization.

Sama: a dance of peace

The *Sama* dance, performed during the festivities, is a rhythmic and sym-



■ A group of Kurdish men performing a special dance during the Pir Shalyar ceremony

Photo: Peshraw Mabdi



■ A man in Kurdish traditional clothing looking at Hawraman Takht village in the Eastern Kurdistan (northeastern Iran)

Photo: Nasib Ali Khayat



Photo: Sara Jafari

■ A group of men playing Daf and singing at Pir Shalyar ceremony.

bolic dance where participants join hands, embodying unity and harmony. Pir Shalyar’s vision is conveyed through the dance, which illustrates that the people of Hawraman are peace-loving and cooperative. The dance demonstrates collective strength and a shared commitment to working hand-in-hand for the greater good. The performance of the *Sama* dance showcases the vibrant traditions of the people of Hawraman to both locals and visitors.

Dinner at Pir Shalyar’s house

The celebration culminates in a communal dinner hosted at Pir Shalyar’s house, symbolizing unity among diverse groups. The gathering highlights the importance of coming together under one roof to address common challenges and achieve shared goals. Pir Shalyar’s vision extends to fostering dialogue and cooperation among tribes to build a stronger, united community. Importantly, the event encourages discussions about collective action, including parliamentary elections, to make the region stronger and overcome adversaries.

Economic and cultural significance

The celebration draws visitors to the Hawraman region, boosting local tourism and spreading awareness about

the community’s rich heritage. It serves as a platform to showcase the region’s unique culture and traditions. The men and women of Hawraman use the opportunity to sell handmade crafts, textiles, and local foods. This commercial aspect transforms the celebration into an economic opportunity, ensuring that the region benefits both culturally and financially.

A legacy of hope and resilience

Pir Shalyar is a legendary figure deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual heritage of Hawraman, a picturesque region nestled in the Zagros Mountains. Revered as a symbol of unity, wisdom, and resilience, the celebration held each year in his honor reflects the enduring spirit of the Kurdish people.

The annual ritual of Pir Shalyar has been passed down for over a millennium, adapting over time while preserving its core values of sacrifice, unity, and cultural pride. By celebrating these traditions, the people of Hawraman not only preserve their heritage, but also inspire future generations to uphold and adapt these values in an ever-changing world. Ultimately, the event continues to strengthen community bonds, attract global attention, and reinforce the vibrant spirit of the Hawraman region. ●

HISTORY

Surezha Examining 6,500 Years of History



Qassim Khidbir

has 15 years of experience in journalism and media development in Iraq. He has contributed to both local and international media outlets.

On the sunbaked plains of Kurdistan, about 20 kilometers south of the capital Erbil, lies the ancient village of Surezha. At first glance, it may seem like any other quiet spot in the countryside, but beneath the surface, it holds the secrets of a life long forgotten. For more than a decade, Gil Stein, an archaeology professor from the University of Chicago, has been working at Surezha, uncovering the remains of a village that dates back 6,500 years, giving us a rare look at one of the earliest human settlements known to exist.

Stein's work began in 2013 when he and his team started excavating the site. Unlike many other digs, where ancient settlements are buried deep beneath layers of earth, Surezha's ancient past is just below the surface. "We are very lucky here at Surezha," says Stein, who is also director of the Chicago Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation. "The early periods we're interested in are just centimeters down, which allows us to study them in great detail."

This unique situation has allowed the team to study a prehistoric era known as the Ubaid period, a time when small farming villages in Mesopotamia like Surezha were just beginning to grow into more complex societies.

What makes Surezha particularly special is that it was abandoned around 3400 BC, leaving much of its history undisturbed. "It's a rare opportunity," Stein explains, "to look back at life without the challenges of digging through the deep layers that are common in other parts of Mesopotamia." This has allowed the team to gather valuable information about how the people of Surezha lived, worked, and interacted with the world around them.

Regional economies and social structures

One of the key discoveries from Surezha is how it was connected to larger urban centers like Arbela, now known as Erbil. Even 6,500 years ago, Arbela was a growing town, and Surezha, though smaller, played an important role in supporting it. "We believe that Surezha was part of a rural system controlled by Arbela," says Stein. "By 4500 BC, Arbela was probably a town of significant size, while Surezha, with maybe 1,000 or 2,000 people, helped supply the larger town with food."

The land around Erbil has always been rich and fertile, perfect for farming, which made it a key agricultural production area. The people of Surezha grew crops like wheat, barley, and figs, much like the crops still grown in the region today. They also raised sheep and goats, which provided wool, milk, and meat. "Their diet was pretty similar to what people eat today," Stein describes. "They

“Stein’s discoveries also shed light on the broader significance of Erbil during this period”

Aerial view of Surezha: An ancient village near Erbil dating back 6,500 years, offering a glimpse into early Mesopotamian life.

Photo Courtesy of Chicago University



■ Professor Gil Jeremy Stein, leading archaeologist and director of the Chicago Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation, overseeing the Surezha excavation.

Photo: Safin Hamid

grew barley, made beer, and may have even made yogurt. In fact, we found a ceramic strainer used for separating yogurt, which was a pretty exciting find.”

But Surezha was not just a farming village. It was also part of a broader trade network, linking it to regions far beyond its borders. The team found pottery and obsidian (a form of volcanic glass) that suggest trade with places as far away as western Iran and eastern Türkiye. The obsidian found at Surezha, for example, came from volcanic sites around Lake Van in Türkiye. “This shows us that materials were being traded over long distances,” says Stein. “Even in this small village, we find evidence of connections to a much larger world.”



■ Examining ancient animal bones: Archaeologists analyze remains to understand the diet and economy of Surezha's early inhabitants.

Photo: Safin Hamid



Photo: Safin Hamid

One of the most interesting aspects of Surezha is what it reveals about the social structure of the time. Though the village was small, its society was not equal. The team discovered intricately carved seals used to mark ownership and track goods, some of which featured detailed designs of animals like deer, which Stein says were symbols of wealth and status. “These elites controlled local resources and were part of a larger trade network,” explains Stein. “We can see that there were already classes separating the powerful and the common people.”

This growing social inequality was a sign of the times. The wealthier members of society could pass their status and influence down



■ Archaeologists at work: Unearthing layers of history at the Surezha site, where life flourished thousands of years ago.

Photo Courtesy of Chicago University

to their children, creating a hereditary elite. “Society was starting to form into classes,” Stein says. “We’re seeing the beginnings of what would later become the structured, urbanized societies of Mesopotamia.”

The mosaic of Mesopotamian civilization

Religion also played a significant role in Surezha’s daily life. The team found what they believe to be a shrine or temple within the village, with an altar made of mud bricks and plaster. Nearby, they found evidence of religious offerings, including a large stone bowl. “We think this room

was used for rituals,” Stein explains. “But because there’s no written record from this time, we can only guess what kind of rituals they performed.”

One of the most touching discoveries was the practice of burying infants within the home. “We found a house where babies were buried in jars and placed near the doorway,” says Stein. “It’s heartbreaking to think about, but it shows how families kept their lost children close, even after death.” Adults, on the other hand, were typically buried in community cemeteries, showing the different customs for the young and the old.



■ Human remains uncovered: Archaeologists study early burial practices at Surezha to learn about the people who lived near Erbil 6,500 years ago.

Photo: Sajfin Hamid



■ Human remains uncovered: Archaeologists study early burial practices at Surezha to learn about the people who lived near Erbil 6,500 years ago.

Photo: Sajfin Hamid

Stein’s discoveries also shed light on the broader significance of Erbil during this period. “Erbil’s importance stretches back thousands of years,” he says. “From the Akkadian and Assyrian Empires to the Persian Empire, it has always been a center of power and trade.”

As Stein’s team continues their work at Surezha, they hope to learn even more about how this small village fit into the broader picture of early Mesopotamian civilization. “There is still so much more to uncover about how these early societies functioned, traded, and worshipped,” says Stein.

The discoveries at Surezha offer a rare glimpse into a world long gone, but still deeply connected to the present. Through their farming, trade, religious rituals, and social structures, the people of Surezha helped shape the early stages of human civilization in one of the world’s most historically rich regions. As Professor Stein puts it, “The people of Surezha may have lived in a small village, but they were part of a much larger and interconnected world – one that was already showing the early signs of the urbanized societies that would come to dominate Mesopotamia.” ●

Taufiq Wahby Lion of Language



Rafiq Salih

is Director General of
Zheen Center Publication.

Leading Kurdish statesman and politician Taufiq Wahby was born into a family that loved writing and language. His maternal grandfather, Rasul Masti (Katib Al-Arshif), was a writer for literary and cultural magazines of the Ottoman Empire's Covenant of Union. Born in the fourth district of Sulaymaniyah on December 31, 1890, Wahby completed his preparatory studies in the military school in Sulaymaniyah and his preparatory studies in the military preparatory school in Baghdad Province. In 1905, he traveled to Istanbul and completed school there.

After his schooling, Wahby fought in the Ottoman army in 1908, before becoming an officer in 1911 and moving to Albania, where he fought against Italy. In 1913, he returned to the military staff college, but was again called into public service during World War I from 1914 to 1918, during which he served as chief of staff of a division and was ranked chief of the battlefields in the Dardanelles, Iraq, and Palestine. In 1918, he received the Military Staff Certificate in Istanbul. In June 1919, he left Istanbul and returned to Iraq, where he became governor of the Ranya district.

Statesman and linguist

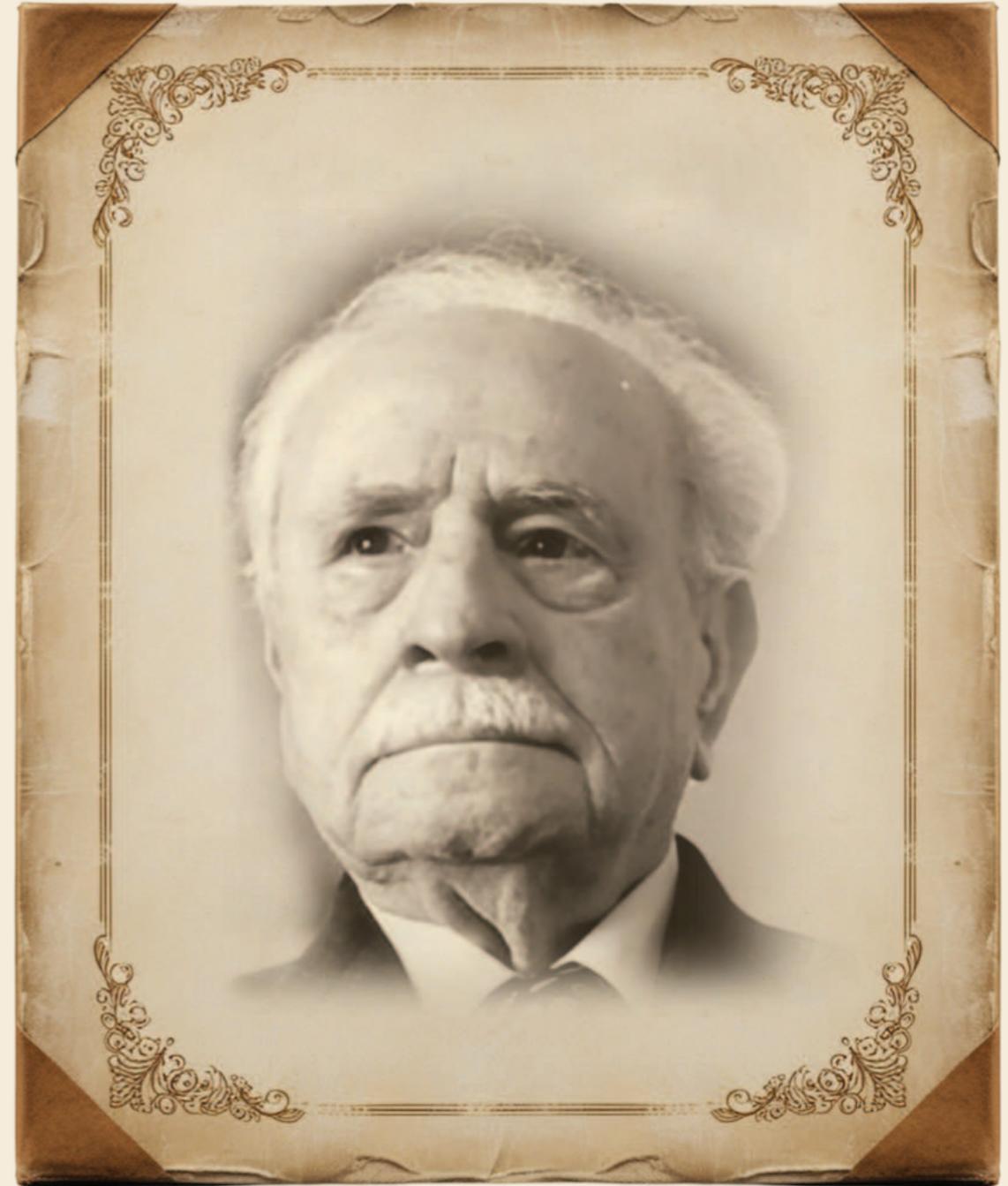
Wahby's return to Iraq and Kurdistan marked the beginning of what would be a long political conflict. In April 1920, he was elected as a member of the Sulaymaniyah Municipality Board of Directors,

a position he remained in until 1921. Later, he went to Baghdad and was appointed to the military staff – the nucleus of the new Iraqi army – and participated in the Movements Division to head the army's staff. In 1922, he became a Major in the Iraqi army. In September of that year, he became one of the Kurdish officers who joined Sheikh Mahmoud al-Hafid Barzinji on the journey from Baghdad to Kifri and then Sulaymaniyah, where he was appointed as an assistant to Sheikh Mahmoud in the second term of the Sheikh's administration.

Throughout his military and early political career, Wahby was always thinking about language. Fluent in Turkish, Arabic, Persian, English, German, and French, Wahby was also familiar with the Old and Middle Persian dialects, Avestan, and Sanskrit. This depth of linguistic knowledge prompted him, in 1923, to begin laying down rules for the Kurdish language at the Ministry of Education's request. However, the government ultimately disapproved of his efforts because the Director General of Education Sati' al-Husri, who held prejudiced views about Kurds, opposed him.

Forming the Iraqi army and public service

Wahby was one of the founders of the Ottoman Sulaymaniyah Military School and served as its director from 1925 to 1929. In August 1929, he was promoted from



■ Taufiq Wahby.

Photo Credit: Zheen Center Archive



Photo Credit: Zheen Center Archive

the rank of Lieutenant Colonel to the rank of Colonel by Royal Decree No. 156. He was then sent to the Senior Officers College in the city of Kent in the UK by Royal Decree No. 105 in April 1930.

In August 1930, Wahby was dismissed from his position by the Ministry of Interior. This was due to his role in establishing the National Authority, which supervised the civil movement demanding Kurdish rights in Iraq. His relationship with the brigade severed, he traveled to Beirut, where he issued a statement on the Kurdish issue in 1932, and remained there until 1935.

Back in Iraq in 1936, he was appointed the Director of Public Works. In March 1938, he began serving as the Director General of Public Surveying. He resigned from that post in 1941. Later, in 1944, he joined Hamdi al-Pachachi's administration as Minister of Finance. In June of the same year, he was also assigned as the representative of Mosul but resigned two years later. He then joined Salih Jabr's administration as Minister of Education in 1947 and became a representative of the Sulaymaniyah Brigade once again. In 1948, he resigned from the post. In the years 1948-1950, he was appointed a member of the Iraqi Council of Senates. In May 1949, he was awarded the Civil Order of the British Empire with the rank of Leader, by Royal Decree No. 1587.

After this, he became Minister of Social Affairs in Tawfiq Al-Suwaidi's administration in May 1950 and left in September the same year. Wahby was therefore in Türkiye when the July 14, 1958 Revolution occurred in Iraq; instead of returning to Iraq, he went to London. He stayed there until January 15, 1984, when he passed away. According to his wishes, his remains were interred in Mount Pirmagrun west of Sulaymaniyah.

Publications and writings

Wahby's scholarly interests include Sufism and Indo-European and Indo-Iranian history, languages, religions, and customs, among other topics, which he explored through numerous written works.

He penned articles for a variety of periodicals and journals, including *Sulaimani*, *Diyari Kurdistan*, *Jin*, *Jiyan*, *Galawej*, *Dingi Geti Taza*, *Sumer - Journal of the Iraqi Scientific Academy*, *Al-Katib*, *Journal of the Iraqi Women's Union*, and *Peshkawtin*. In addition to the *Fraternity* newspaper, Kori Zaniyari Kurd (Kurdish Scientific Academy), *Shafak*, *Al-Irfan Al-Saydawiyya*, *Perwarda w Zanst (Education and Knowledge)*, and *Altaakbi* newspaper, he also published articles outside of Kurdistan in magazines like *Kurdistan 1965*, *Kurdika 1968*, and the magazine affiliated to Taqadum Kurdistan Center. Moreover, he published a handful of stories in 1939 and served as a linguistic supervisor for the Kurdish Radio in Baghdad, which he

and Muhammad Amin Zaki founded. In 1943, he also founded the magazine *Dengi Geti Taza* and served as its proofreader.

Wahby was elected the Kurdish Advancement Club's honorary president in 1956. However, he was unable to hold onto his position as the first president of the Higher Education Council in Iraq, which ultimately laid the groundwork for the country's first university. The magazine *Al-Katib* was published by the Iraqi Authorship, Translation and Publication Society, of which he was elected president in 1958. He had also previously been a founding member of the Iraqi Scientific Academy, having been elected as its first vice president and active member in January 1948. Wahby was also a member of the British Geographical Academy at the time and was elected as an honorary member of the Kurdish Scientific Academy upon its establishment.

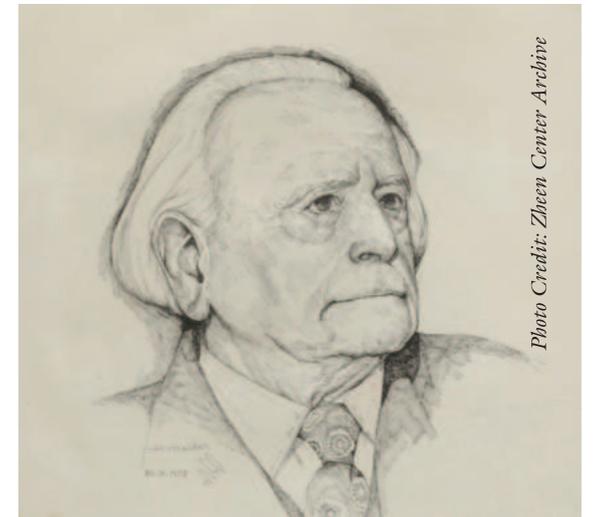


Photo Credit: Zheen Center Archive

Taufiq Wahby was a brilliant scholar. He frequently visited the late Mustafa Jawad in his Baghdad library to absorb his extensive knowledge of theology and ancient history. He was selected to serve as the first president of the Higher Education Council and to establish the first university in Iraq because of his extensive knowledge of teaching and educational methodologies.

Wahby was affiliated with the following communities throughout his lifetime:

- The London-based Royal Central Asiatic Society
- The Anti-Tuberculosis Society;
- A life member of London's Royal Asiatic Society
- A British Cultural Club member

His medals and decorations included:

- The Order of the Two Rivers, Second Class, Civil Type
- The Sardar Ali Afghan Order
- The British C.P. Order ●

Montessori School in Erbil Prepares Students for Real Life

Kurdistan Chronicle

Founded in 2018, the International Montessori School-Erbil has grown into a flourishing community in the capital of the Kurdistan Region. With around 500 students enrolled, the school enjoys the enthusiastic support of parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as of the Montessori Foundation in the United States.

The Montessori method of education was started in the early 20th century by the Italian physician Maria Montessori and marked a new educational philosophy by focusing on children's natural interests and activities rather than formal teaching methods. "To consider the school as a place where instruction is given is one point of view," Maria Montessori argued. "But, to consider the school as a preparation for life is another. In the latter case, the school must satisfy all the needs of life."

For the Kurdistan Region, the International Montessori School-Erbil has additional significance. The great-granddaughter of Maria Montessori, Carolina, was married to Iraqi Foreign Minister and top Kurdish politician Fuad Hussein and focused on spreading her legacy by translating her diaries. Carolina recently passed away due to sickness on April 7, 2024.

Cultivating soft skills

The Montessori School's official vision is to provide the highest quality of learning, aiming to produce graduates

who, besides having skills and knowledge in their discipline zones, are critical thinkers who can make significant changes in their communities and in the world.

"The Montessori approach is very important because it focuses on the child," said Azhen Saeed Abdulla, the principal of International Montessori School-Erbil. "The learning journey is made more enjoyable with this approach and through hands-on learning, which places the student at the center of education. Here, while achieving academic skills or requirements is a plus, we cultivate students to have the soft skills that they will need in life outside of education."

Abdulla added that the school's parents choose Montessori for its attention to their students' personalities, social skills, independence, and well-being. "We provide a healthy environment for kids to grow," she said.

Meena Rasheed, who supervises the school's academic quality control, added that Montessori prepares students for life after school. "Most students enter the real world and are shocked. We want to focus on how to use knowledge and apply it to real life."

Abdulla said the first principle of the Montessori approach is respecting the child. "This is very important. If you look at the Montessori classrooms it's different. You can see the difference between Montessori education and other schools."

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The Montessori approach prepares a very healthy human being for society
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■ A young pupil at Montessori school in Erbil



Photo Credit: Montessori School in Erbil



Furthermore, she said that students at the school often work in groups. "This allows students to become more independent and share information with group mates. This is also important because later, in school and life, they can be good team members."

Foundational support

Abdulla emphasized that the backing of the Montessori Foundation in the United States is significant in the school's success in Kurdistan. Being accredited and affiliated by foundation provides a more reliable and higher standard quality of education.

The Montessori educational method itself is not initially from the United States, but most of the Montessori schools in operation are in the United States. "It's most common in the

United States rather than in Europe or other countries. If you search Montessori online, you are most likely to find a location in the United States," she noted.

The foundation is actively involved in the school's performance, performing

quality control visits to Kurdistan every year, in addition to providing the school with books, materials, and curriculums. "They visit Kurdistan every year to check how we are managing this school and that we are aligning with the standards of Montessori," said Abdulla. "This is one reason that parents choose the school."

During these visits, foundation members suggest the most updated curriculum that is aligned with what schools are doing in the United States. "We are following the same script and sequence that is the common core curriculum. They are very cooperative and supportive whenever we need their assistance or their guidance for anything," she noted.

The school also offers Advanced Placement (AP) coursework, which is a system from the United States and allows students to study abroad.



Photo Credit: Montessori School in Erbil

"AP programs are used in the United States mainly for facilitating students to apply to colleges. Students who take an AP curriculum in high school are both more eligible for U.S. colleges and more attractive to admission committees," Rashced said.

"I think parents would like to choose international schools because they think that their child might have more options in the future in terms of going to universities in other countries," Abdulla added. "All U.S. credits are certified there, as the school is accredited, and they will be able to apply to any university abroad since they have a U.S. diploma."

Serving the community

In the future, the International Montessori School-Erbil plans to expand to other governorates in the Kurdistan Region. "It's very necessary that we implement this system in all other schools in Kurdistan and Iraq as well," Abdulla said. "The Montessori approach prepares a very healthy human being for society, for everyone."

"If you look at the new generation, if you worked with them, there are some gaps with their skills. In Montessori it's a full package, it works on every aspect," she added.

"We would like children in Kurdistan to benefit from this approach. We want to serve our community, especially since Montessori philosophy focuses on humanity and taking care of the sustainability of the environment. I think people need these skills nowadays," Rasheed concluded. ●

A Movement Sparked by Potential

Celebrating International Volunteer Day with a look at how volunteers are shaping Kurdistan's future.



Ayat Albabar

is an Erbil-based writer with a Bachelor's degree in Translation. Currently working at Visit Kurdistan, she specializes in marketing, advertising, and storytelling.



Photo Credit: Volunteer.krd



If you ask Mohammed al-Jaff to tell you about the transformative ripple effect that volunteering has created in his community, he will relate a recent encounter that he had with an elderly man. Last June, as al-Jaff volunteered his time to spread awareness about blood donations at an event in Erbil arranged by an organization called Volunteer.KRD, he was approached by the man, who expressed curiosity about the event.

“I explained the need for blood donations in the community,” said al-Jaff, age 21, who convinced the man to give blood for the first time. “He even came back with his wife later. She also wanted to save a life.”

Al-Jaff is just one of thousands of young people across Kurdistan volunteering through organizations like Volunteer.KRD – an impact-oriented digital platform overseen by the Kurdistan Foundation – who want to give back to their communities, and help shape Kurdistan's future while developing critical social, technical, and leadership skills.

In the last year alone, nearly 9,000 volunteers have been matched with companies and organizations offering opportunities across the Kurdistan Region via the Volunteer.KRD platform. With each event, volunteers gain confi-

dence and experience by being exposed to opportunities encompassing community health, technology, education, and the environment, making the organization a catalyst for social change and economic development.

Building sustainable communities

Conversations around the potential of volunteering to address socio-economic and environmental issues has gained traction well beyond Kurdistan. In a 2023 report by UN Volunteers, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed described the role of volunteers as “vital in shaping a world where sustainable development is a reality.” The UN has also named December 5 International Volunteer Day.

Recognizing the tremendous potential of volunteering



to shape the Kurdistan Region's future, Volunteer.KRD has also stepped up to act as the only organization in Kurdistan advocating for volunteer's rights. Participants who sign up to use the organization's platform are compensated for transportation and meals during their service, are sometimes paid for their time, and collect points through an hours-tracking system that can be used in letters of recommendation for university or exchange programs. Over the last year alone, the organization has posted and organized over 140 volunteer opportunities on their digital platform and facilitated over 600 hours of community service.

Mumen Ahmed Karwanchi, Marketing Manager and owner of Karwanchi Group – one of the more than 141 companies currently registered on the Volunteer.KRD platform – said that he regularly works with volunteers to support his business and training needs. Karwanchi added that engaging volunteers has enabled the company to reduce costs and spread awareness about his business while developing stronger ties with the local community.

“Volunteering is vital for our region's development by providing young people with valuable experience and skills that prepare them for future careers,” said Karwanchi. “It strengthens the local community, enhances the reputations of our businesses, and helps build a skilled workforce that benefits our communities, companies, and economy in the long term,” he said, adding that he would consider hiring a volunteer permanently based on their performance and fit to company culture.

While being hired is not the main goal of the Volunteer.KRD platform, Yara Hassan Barzanji, Program Director at both Volunteer.KRD and Jobs.KRD – a platform offering paid jobs across the region – has seen this happen multiple times.

Yara recalls one community event where free diabetes tests were offered in which a medical volunteer was given a business card. “This volunteer was offered a job at one of

Erbil's best laboratories. Neither one of her parents are able to work, and this experience changed not just her life, but her entire family's life,” said Barzanji.

She added that the organization is working to develop the Kurdish leaders of tomorrow by offering a monthly one-week boot-camp to train select volunteers to develop employable skills, including better time management, communication, problem solving, and technical and event management skills.

to significantly expand our impact across Kurdistan,” said Barzanji. “Our primary goal is to double the beneficiaries we currently serve by positively affecting the lives of over a 100,000 people, and we are working toward growing our volunteer base from nearly 9,000 to 25,000.”

One way the organization will achieve this is through a new program to create a culture of volunteering in local universities. The program, called Volunteer.KRD Clubs, is designed to nurture leadership qualities by offer-

Despite having landed a paid job three months into his volunteering experiences with Volunteer.KRD as a Content Manager at Lumark Agency, al-Jaff said he will continue donating his time for educational projects and encourages others to do the same.

“Volunteering is creating positive changes in Kurdistan in ways we might not immediately see,” said al-Jaff. “There's something special about being part of initiatives that help people learn and grow.”



Volunteers cleaning public streets during a campaign in Erbil.

Photo Credit: Volunteer.krd

A culture of volunteering

In the future, Volunteer.KRD will build on the momentum achieved over the past year by on-boarding more companies who require volunteer support and launching an app to better track impact, connect volunteers with opportunities, and streamline coordination.

“This next year is a big year for Volunteer.KRD. We have ambitious plans

ing students a space to connect and to pitch their own community-impact ideas to members of the Volunteer.KRD team. Each month, one idea is selected to be implemented, empowering students to create and lead their own impact projects.

“These plans align with our vision to make volunteering a cornerstone of community progress in Kurdistan,” said Barzanji.

For Barzanji, witnessing this same ripple effect of inspired action on a micro and macro scale has been a major theme over the past year, as a single person's efforts often inspire others to take action.

“We are growing carefully and intentionally,” said Barzanji. “We currently have about 9,000 volunteers out there making change. These are people of various ages willing to give back to and serve their nation.” ●

Jamana A Young Designer's Aspiration



Riband Saadallah

is a professional photographer and seasoned journalist. He is a member of the Union of Journalists in Finland.

Huda Hassan, a 26-year-old Kurdistan girl from Erbil, is the designer of a modern Kurdish clothing brand of her own creation called *Jamana*.

Having launched the brand four years ago, Hassan's designs rely on the texture of the fabrics she uses and are inspired by Kurdistan's iconic nature.

“ Hassan hopes that her designs reach the international level and place Kurdish clothes and designs deservedly on the world stage

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When Hassan, then a second-year student at University of Kurdistan Hewler, participated in a design campaign held to encourage young people during the Covid-19 pandemic, she knew she was ready to immediately get to work. Hence, the pandemic-triggered lockdown became an unexpected opportunity for her to make plans to launch her brand.

During her undergraduate studies, Hassan also observed many foreigners in the Kurdistan Region and began to think deeply about what they might want to buy as a souvenir to remind them of their time in the region. It was then that the idea of creating a clothing brand was born, and she began to create a brand that is Kurdish in taste, exquisite, modern, and stylish.

When she first sat down to design a new piece of clothing, Hassan was inspired by elements of Kurdish culture. Later, she began to think about the person wearing it, whether in a classic or modern way. Hassan wanted her design to stand out and catch the attention of passersby or strangers at gatherings and parties. She intended to make sure her invention showcased Kurdish culture in a unique and positive way. “Traditional Kurdish clothes for girls and boys are not easy to wear on every occasion,” she explained. Thus, she tried to design several pieces of clothing that were both easy and pleasant to wear.

Akhabanu

She then began sewing several colorful Kurdish pieces. Although she admits that she did not quite like her first attempts, she was keen to finish the job anyway. The first collection, Akhabanu, consisted of several pieces, including wraps and scarves. Then came phase two, the time for the models and photographers to come and present this new brand to the world.



Kurdish fashion designer Huda Hassan.

Photo: Riband Saadallah

Ultimately, she was pleased with Akhabanu, the name of which expresses the support of Kurdish men for Kurdish women, a compliment often given to women.

As Hassan was designing her first clothing items during the pandemic, the idea of designing a mask was

timely. The resulting design became part of the Akhabanu collection, and became a huge success, with Hassan selling thousands of them to those eager to look more fashionable during the pandemic.

People not only bought the mask, but some brands also started copying

it. The Akhabanu masks were sold in the market, and many diplomats and representatives of foreign countries showed interest in them, buying at least one. Hassan was upset to see her design copied, but she also acknowledges that copying meant that her brand had been successful.





Photo Credit: Jamana Fashion



Jola and Zhala

Supported by her friends, Hassan continued to design more and make new pieces of clothing. She produced several other collections, including Jola, which had a different style because it was made upon the direct request of buyers. The collection included a vest covered in a blend of local wool and with the name of the collection written in Kurdish on the inside.

Another collection of clothes, Zhala, stands out thanks to its purple color and cotton flowers. The fabric for Zhala is generally used across the Middle East, but the Kurds use a specific kind. "One day I was walking in nature with friends. I saw the cotton flower blooming. It was very attractive and full of hope. I immediately thought I should make a collection inspired by it," she said.

Over the past four years, Hassan has designed more than 17 collections, some of which have been in collaboration with buyers and other designers.

For Hassan and her network, it is all part of their plan to stand behind their astonishing and unique Kurdish clothing designs. They plan to expand on their ideas, designs, and production in the future. Ultimately, Hassan hopes that her designs reach the international level and place Kurdish clothes and designs deservedly on the world stage. ●

Photo Credit: Jamana Fashion

Duhok International Film Festival



Mohammad Dargalayi is a journalist and photographer with 14 years of experience. He is a member of IFJ Global.

From December 16-19, 2024, the picturesque city of Duhok in the Kurdistan Region hosted the 11th Duhok International Film Festival. This year's festival showcased a diverse lineup of Kurdish and international films that covered a wide spectrum of topics but especially highlighted the role of sports in global cinema.

Aiming to create an atmosphere for the exchange of different cultures and human values through film, the festival was launched in 2011, and has been held every year, except during the direst conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war against ISIS.

Kurdistan: the land of untold stories

As an integral part of Mesopotamia, Kurdistan is known as the cradle of civilization. It was here that mankind first formed settlements and where life began to brim with stories. Indeed, telling stories is one of the driving forces behind the foundation of the Duhok IFF.

The festival's organizers are aware of this legacy and are keen to cultivate a cultural

identity for this region that celebrates the past and demonstrates that it is a place of peace and development rather than political conflict. "The fertile land that Mesopotamia once presented is now the land that can imbibe quality cinema and epic stories," according to the festival's website.

However, the main aim of the festival is to build a launching pad for Kurdish films to reach the world. By creating a platform for films from Kurdistan, it creates space for creativity, allowing filmmakers to explore new terrain. Unique in the region, it seeks to unlock new talents and offer a convening point for up-and-coming filmmakers.

Crossing borders, bridging cultures

Over the course of the last 11 festivals, thousands of festival participants and film enthusiasts have visited the Kurdistan Region, helping to promote Kurdistan as a safe, peaceful, and welcoming place in the middle of a conflict-torn region. The annual event also seeks to connect Kurdish film with the world, with festival organizers working tirelessly to reconnect Kurd-



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The main aim of the festival is to build a launching pad for Kurdish films to reach the world

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Photos: Mohammed Dargalayî

ish filmmakers in diaspora with their homeland and to build cultural and professional bridges between local and international filmmakers.

In his welcoming note on the festival's booklet, Ameer Ali Mohammad, President of the Duhok International Film Festival, described cinema as a sort of revolution that can spark change and break down barriers between people across borders.

“Cinema has the power to correct ideas and worldviews while also serving as a means for communicating any message. In today's terms, it sets the groundwork for a robust economy. We are in the early stages of building that foundation here in Kurdistan, and this event is the infrastructure that is needed, supporting the aim

of keeping optimism alive and sparkling,” Mohammed wrote.

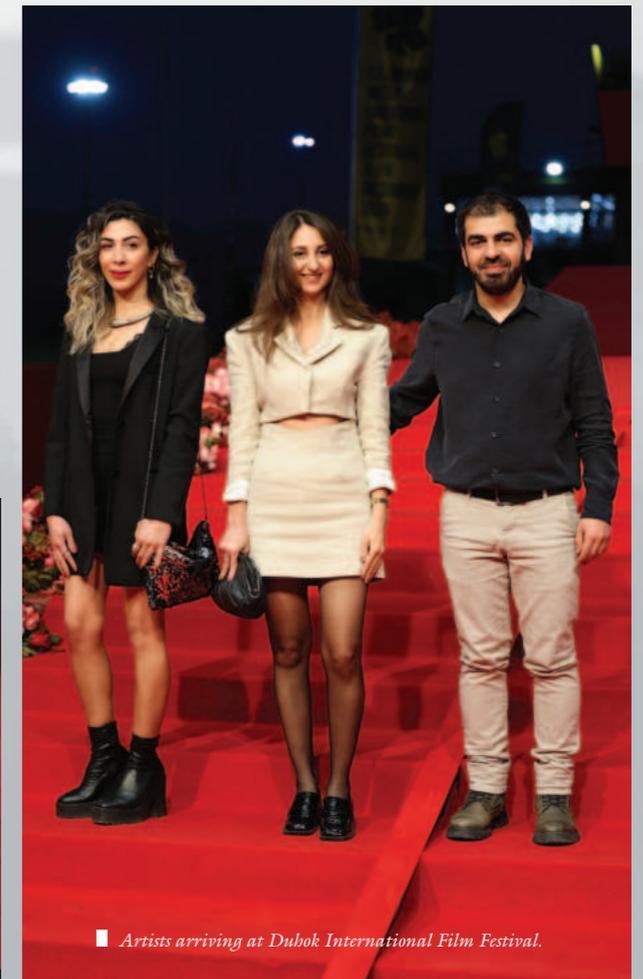
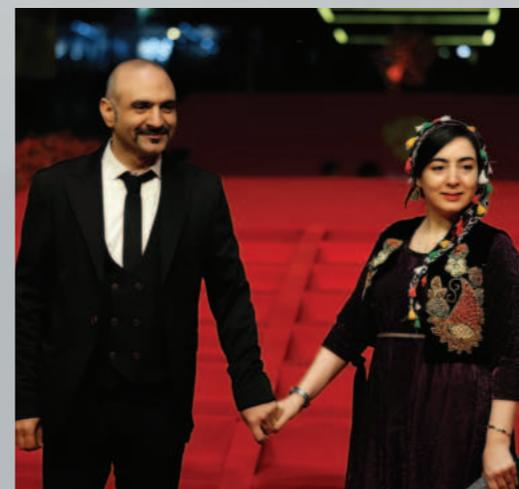
Shawkat Amin Korki, a distinguished filmmaker and the festival's artistic director, noted in his speech that India was the festival's focus country this year and that organizers have curated a captivating selection of Indian cinema, from the timeless works of Satyajit Ray to the innovative creations of emerging filmmakers.

Festival in detail

This year, more than 750 films were submitted to the festival, from which 107 were selected to compete for 20 awards across different categories. During the one-week event, 105 films in total were screened in Duhok and Zakho.

Massoud Arif, a spokesperson for the festival, expressed his optimism about the increasing number of female filmmakers joining the competition. He told *Kurdistan Chronicle* that Solin Youssef, the winner of the Youth Oscar for Best Film of the Year in Germany, was one of the prominent Kurdish female filmmakers joining the festival alongside other accomplished female artists such as Berivana Banoush and Lanya Nooralddin.

Asked about the festival's logo and award shape – a grape leaf – Arif explained that it highlights Duhok's rich vineyards, which have become not only an agricultural asset, but part of the cultural identity of the city.



Artists arriving at Duhok International Film Festival.

Photos: Mohammed Dargalayî



■ Duhok Governor Ali Tatar speaking during the 11th Duhok International Film Festival.

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During the one-week event, 105 films in total were screened in Duhok and Zakho

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Photos: Mohammed Dargalayi



■ Official poster of the film *When the Walnut Leaves Turn Yellow* by Mehmet Ali Konar.

Award Winners of the 11th Duhok International Film Festival

- Best Kurdish Film: *When the Walnut Leaves Turn Yellow*
- Best Director: Hisham Zaman, *A Happy Day*
- Best Screenplay: Binevsa Berivan and David Lambert, *The Virgin and a Child*
- Best Actor: Hisham Zaman, *A Happy Day*
- Best Kurdish Actress: Hevin Tekin in *The Virgin and a Child*
- Best Kurdish Documentary: *Rojin's Dream*
- Best Foreign Documentary: *It Ain't Where You From*
- Best Kurdish Short Film: *Privacy*
- Chamber Award for Best Short Film: *Home Made*
- Special Honorary Award for Kurdish Documentary Films: *Our Ismail*
- Best Scenic Director: *A Happy Day*
- Best Foreign Short Film: *Factory Drop*
- Yilmaz Guney Award: *Inshalah a Boy*
- Best New Talent: *One of Those Days When Heme Dies*
- Special Honorary Award for World Feature Films: *Mond*
- Special Honor: Salah Qadi in *A Happy Day*
- Special Honor: *Ever Since, I Have Been Flying*
- Special Honorary Award for World Documentary: *Lions of Mesopotamia*
- Special Honors: *Limo Knew Everything*
- The Fibrisca Honorary Award: *A Happy Day* ●

Painting the Exodus

Kurdistan Chronicle

Born in 2001, Gulan Hamza is a talented female artist from Duhok who uses her powerful paintings to explore themes of displacement, migration, and the collective trauma of the Kurdish people. Having graduated with honors from the Department of Painting at the Duhok Institute of Fine Arts in 2022, she is now studying at the Department of Painting at the College of Fine Arts at Duhok University.

Hamza recently spoke with *Kurdistan Chronicle* to discuss her latest art project, “Immigration,” which is currently being exhibited in Erbil with support from the German Goethe-Institut Irak and the Framing Photojournalism School in Erbil.

A daughter’s reflection

As a young woman, while Hamza did not personally endure the traumas that she depicts, she explained that she feels closer to father’s generation than her contemporaries. She attributes the pain and hardship that she illustrates in her work to stories that her father told her of the suffering of the Kurdish people.

The exodus of one million Kurds from Kurdistan in 1991 has had a profound effect on her art, with many of her paintings focusing on the things that were needed most during that event. “I wasn’t alive then, but because I’ve heard the story a lot, I feel like I lived it. We also saw displacement and immigration during the fight against ISIS, so migration is a common theme in my work,” Hamza said.

Hamza also reiterated the necessity of embodying a community’s stories; thus, depictions of this forced migration run deeply through her works. “The migrants were fleeing the brutality and oppression of the Iraqi Ba’athist dictatorship. Our family, like most Kurdish families, participated in this exodus, so my father often tells us that tragic story. In fact, my father wrote about it in the artist’s statement for my exhibition.”

Hamza underscored that her father is a major source of inspiration for her as an artist and person. He is also very supportive of her work. “My father is very helpful. We are very close.”

Connecting with the Kurdish struggle

Hamza spoke of her father’s connection to three decades of the struggle for the rights of the Kurdish people, noting that he has been sharing his experiences with her since she was 13: “These stories relate a struggle that has been ongoing for years to this day and is very connected to Kurdish feelings, and therefore has had a direct impact on me,” she said.

With tears in her eyes, Hamza explained that, when she paints, she often cries.

She clarified that her aim in “Immigration” was to ensure that the tragedies that have befallen the Kurds are not forgotten and to send a message to the whole world that the Kurds have suffered many tragedies. “I would like to be able to open up exhibitions abroad in the future and convey my messages worldwide,” she said.

“
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GULAN HAMZA

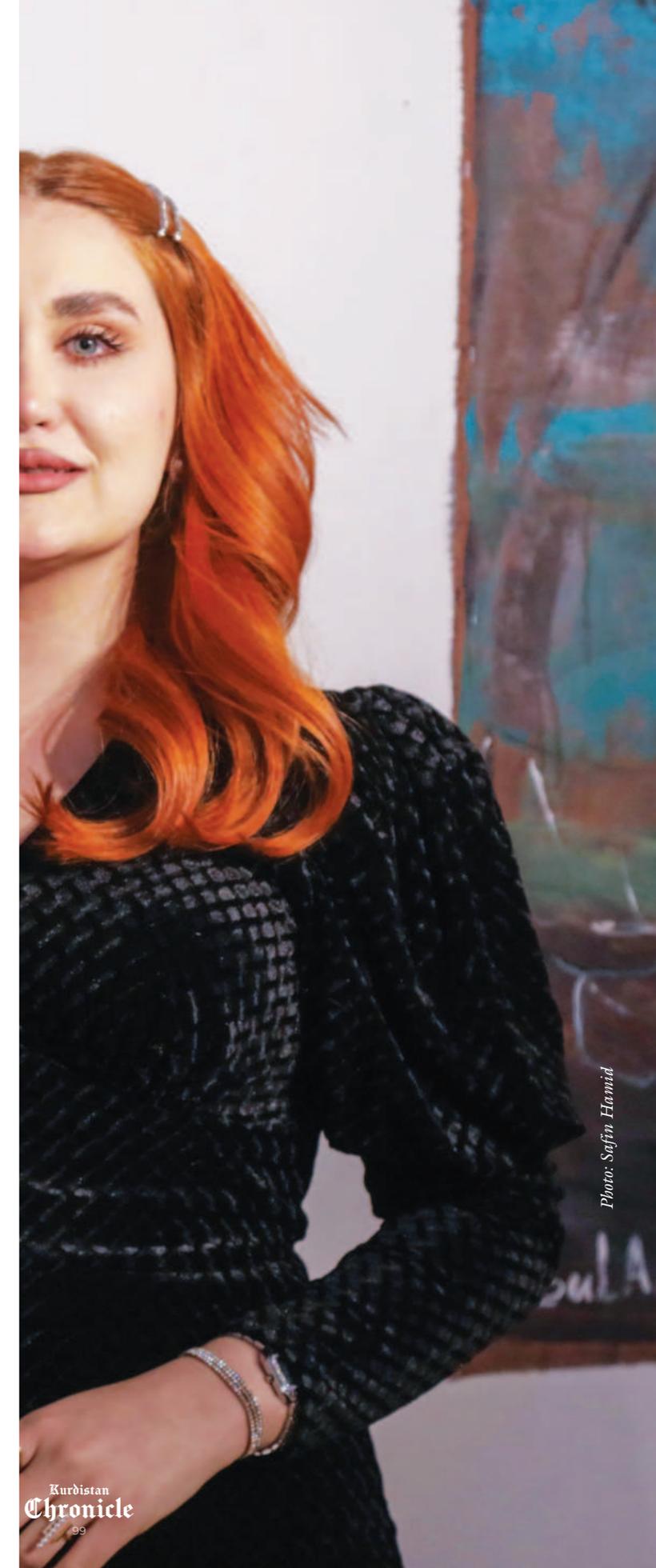


Photo: Saifin Hamid



■ Gulan Hamza installing her artwork before an exhibition opening in Erbil.

Photo: Safin Hamid



■ Gulan Hamza at her art studio.

Hamza also mentioned how she connects with her friends through her paintings. “My friends are very interested in my paintings, which have influenced their thinking about the history of our nation. Since they are my age, they are not as aware of the past as I am, so when they see the paintings, they want to know more about them.”

There are many Kurds with the first name ‘Gulan’, but the origin of her name is different – like everything else in her life, she says. She is named for the Shorshi Gullan, or April Revolution, and her father’s connection to when the Kurds revolted against Saddam Hussein’s regime in 1975. ●

When Music Becomes a Refuge



Mey Dost

is currently pursuing a master's degree in Digital Media Communication at RWTH University in Germany.

Listening to Nurshin and Perwin discuss their music and explain the intricacies of their instruments feels like being transported to another world. As Perwin prepares her *mey*, a woodwind instrument, she carefully readies it to fill the air with music. As she starts playing, her melodies carry every listener in the room to vast and beautiful Kurdish lands. The journey of Nurshin and Perwin is a story of two sisters overcoming terrorism and separation from their family, having had to flee their homeland twice but always finding refuge in the arms of music. *Kurdistan Chronicle* met with the two young women to discover more about their inspiring journey.

Beginnings in Kobani

Perwin learned to play her instruments in Kobani in Western Kurdistan (northern Syria), having to teach herself as there were no formal teachers available in the city. At the age of eight, she began to take singing, dancing, and art lessons at the BaqI Xido Center in Kobani. Her determination to learn the *mey* was sparked by a Kurd from Eastern Kurdistan (northwestern Iran) who inspired her to pursue music.

Nurshin's musical story, on the other hand, began at the age of ten. At 11, she took lessons from famous musician Reshid Sofi from Kobani. In fifth grade, her teacher asked the class what their plans for the future were, and Nurshin noticed that nobody chose anything artistic. Knowing she had a beautiful voice,

she confidently answered that she wanted to be a singer. Her teacher, displeased, told her to choose something else because she was smart. Nurshin, undeterred, remained silent, but her passion for music only grew stronger. "I was simply in love with music," she explained.

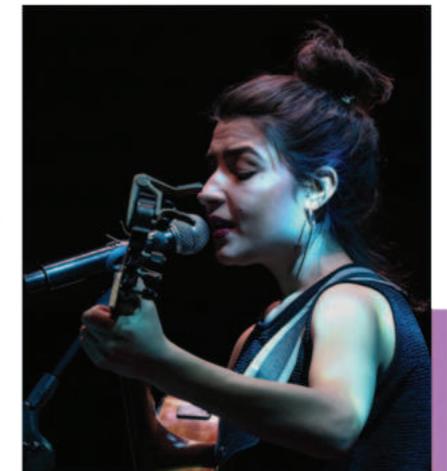
Diyarbakir and return to Kobani

Nurshin left Kobani in 2015 – after the ISIS siege of the city was lifted by Kurdish forces – to attend the Aram Tigran Conservatory for Kurdish Music in Diyarbakir. A year later, Perwin joined her. Admission to the conservatory was based on skill and talent rather than age. During their time there, they not only honed their musical skills, but also learned pedagogy, teaching music lessons to children and adults for a period of three years.

After spending several years at the conservatory – Nurshin was there for four years and Perwin for three – the sisters returned to Kobani in August 2019. Their journey back was fraught with danger. They had to pass through Jerablus, where they faced discrimination because of their Kurdish identity, even having their names forcibly changed to Arabic ones. After spending two months in Kobani, heavy Turkish attacks in the region forced them to flee once again in October 2019. This time, they could only take their instruments and books with them due to limited space in their car.

In the midst of turmoil, however, music remained their constant refuge. Both sis-

Perwin



Nurshin



“

In Erbil, we found the freedom to perform independent concerts, free from any political influences

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ters reminisce about eating pomegranates in the village where they stayed, sharing jokes, taking photos, and writing in their diaries. “Our entire life was built on music,” Nurshin reminisces. “Music taught me about Kurdistan and our Kurdish identity. Through music, we were able to leave Kobani.”

“Music is the expression of inner feelings,” Perwin adds.

Their father, who played and made the tembur, a traditional string instrument, supported their musical endeavors from early on. He loved music and encouraged his children to pursue it since he himself did not have the chance to. In Kobani and Qamishli (Qamişlo in Kurdish), the sisters taught music to children, spreading their love for their culture and art.

New beginnings in Erbil

Moving to Erbil at the end of 2022, they embraced the opportunities and freedom the city offered. “In Erbil, we found the freedom to perform independent concerts, free from any political influences,” the sisters agree.

Nurshin and Perwin are influenced by a variety of musicians, from Fairuz, famous Kurdish musicians, and Armenian composers like Komitas and Aram Khachaturian to classical composers like Beethoven. They also enjoy artists such as Charles Aznavour, Julio Iglesias, and Edith Piaf. “We prefer acoustic over modern electronic music,” Nurshin adds.

“Our band *Diva*, named after the Greek goddess of music, was inspired by Maria Callas’ album *Diva*,” Perwin explains.

The sisters aim to create music that resonates with them and their audience. “It’s a bit difficult to start our own project because music today is often based on electronic elements,” Nurshin says. “We want our listeners to enjoy our music, too, so we need to find a balance between what we love and what our audience likes to listen to.”

The sisters also try to connect the wider musical community in Kurdistan. For instance, they invite other artists to perform when they give



Photo: Sajfin Hamid

■ Nurshin and Perwin performing during a concert in Erbil.

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Our band *Diva*, named after the Greek goddess of music, was inspired by Maria Callas’ album *Diva*

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live concerts, creating events that often feature a rich blend of cultural influences.

Currently, the sisters are preparing a new project, though the idea is still in its early stages.

Kurdistan Chronicle asked them about their greatest achievement so far.

“It’s definitely our independence from political ideologies,

politics, and parties. We can focus solely on music as a free and independent art form,” Nurshin reflects.

“Music is free. Erbil opened doors to freedom for us,” Perwin adds.

As Perwin plays the santoor, a traditional stringed instrument, the tones transport listeners to an ancient world, encapsulating the essence of their musical journey and the rich cultural heritage their inspiring journeys represent. ●

A Tribute to Mehmet Atlı's Musical Legacy "Na, ne tene me"



Mevlüt Oğuz

is a journalist, poet, and activist working in the fields of civil society, culture, and the arts. He is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Kurdish PEN affiliated to International PEN, and the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Association (İHD).

In a heartfelt celebration of artistic legacy, a tribute album titled *Na, ne tene me* (*No, I am not alone*) has been launched to honor Mehmet Atlı's remarkable 30-year journey in the arts. Spearheaded by the talented artist Mirady, this project features contributions from over 50 distinguished artists, including notable figures such as Nizamettin Aric, Brader, Tara Jaf, and Pervin Cakar.

The album is not just a musical endeavor; it is complemented by an accompanying book and documentary that delve into Atlı's creative process through his notes and lyrics. Mirady has played a pivotal role in orchestrating this tribute – from curating the artist lineup to deciding which pieces each artist would interpret and overseeing the arrangements.

A trailblazer in Kurdish music

Reflecting on his experience with tribute albums, Mirady emphasizes that while there have been other Kurdish tribute albums in the past, this project stands out as the most comprehensive one to date. It encapsulates not only the essence of Atlı's work, but also fosters a sense of community among artists who share a profound respect for his contributions.

"In 2014, we embarked on a remarkable musical journey with the creation of *Pesk*, an album that featured a diverse array of artists and was released as a two-CD set. This project not only included a tribute album by Fikri Kutlay, but also encom-

passed a *Zazaki* tribute album. Today, we proudly present this fourth installment, marking it as the most comprehensive tribute album to date, showcasing maximum participation from talented contributors.

"Reflecting on my past experiences, I recall my involvement in *Pesk*, which celebrated the poetry of Bro Omeri. Additionally, I had the honor of contributing as both an artist and composer to projects inspired by the immortal works of poets Metin Altiok and Behcet Aysan, who tragically left this world during the 1993 Sivas massacre," Mirady recalled.

"The insights gained from these collaborations fueled my passion for proposing this new work. During discussions with Mehmet Atlı, our conversations often circled back to it. When we finally presented our vision for the album to him, he embraced it with enthusiasm. Following its release, the concept for an accompanying book and documentary began to take shape as he commenced recording further material," Mirady said.

The inaugural tribute album, which was debut in September 2024, showcases a remarkable collaboration among three generations of musicians. Among the first-generation artists are notable figures such as Brader, Tara Jaff, Nizamettin Aric, and Metin Kahraman. The second-generation features peers of Mehmet Atlı, seasoned musicians who have dedicated nearly three decades to their craft. Mi-



Photo: Mem Ararat

radly expressed optimism for the younger generation, stating, "I am particularly hopeful for them, as they have wholeheartedly embraced this album and contributed significantly."

The meticulous process of selecting artists and curating the repertoire involved extensive preparation. This project released in three parts; which contains forty-four tracks.

Bridges of solidarity and co-production

Mehmet Atlı stands out as a pivotal figure in the evolution of modern Kurdish music, following the influential Ciwan Haco. His innovative approach to composition and harmony has redefined urban music within the genre. As noted by Mirady, Atlı's profound impact is evident in the vocal styles of numerous contemporary musicians, including Mem Ararat, who regard him as a significant source of inspiration.

It is essential for future generations to recognize Atlı's contributions and build upon them, ensuring that Kurdish music continues to evolve and flourish. By honoring his legacy, emerging artists can elevate the genre to new heights, enriching its cultural tapestry for years to come.

In our conversation with Atlı, a truly prolific artist, whose journey began with the *Koma Denge Azadi* Group 30 years ago, we asked him: "What fuels your remarkable productivity, and what inspired you to create this album?"

"My dedication to music is paramount," he explained. "I immerse myself in it daily – whether I'm walking alone, experimenting with instruments,



■ Mehmet Atlı

Photo: Mem Artemêt

or reflecting in the quiet hours after everyone else has gone to bed. Music is not just my profession; it's my way of thinking and living. My commitment to creating new songs stems from both a personal need and a responsibility to my audience. They deserve fresh lyrics that resonate with their experiences.

“This album aims to showcase that Kurds are actively participating in contemporary music production, paralleling global artistic movements. We strive to showcase how

our identity is normalized and resilient against external pressures, fueled by our labor, creativity, and innovative spirit. Our mission is to foster solidarity and collaborative efforts among Kurdish artists, creating a vibrant network that celebrates our cultural heritage while promoting artistic expression,” Atlı said.

In his latest album, Atlı expresses a profound sense of connection and belonging. He proudly ac-

knowledges the contributions of an impressive ensemble of over 50 artists, featuring both seasoned talents like Nizamettin Aric Brader, Tara Jaf, and Pervin Cakar, alongside emerging voices such as Simir Rudan, Ferit Sevim, and Murat Demir. The album's title, Na, ne tene me, encapsulates Atlı's sentiment: it reassures him that he is not alone in his artistic journey.

Atlı reflects on the significance of having such a diverse group interpret his songs. He feels that their willingness to engage with his music



validates his 30 years of dedication to the craft. This recognition from peers is not only an honor, but also a testament to the camaraderie within the music community. For Atlı, this collaborative spirit brings him immense joy and reinforces the belief that his hard work has made a meaningful impact.

The interplay of literature and music

Atlı, a prolific composer, has not

only penned his own written works in Kurmanci and Zazaki, but has also drawn inspiration from esteemed poets like Arjen Ari, Abdullah Pesew, Kamuran Ali Bedirxan, Kemal Burkay, and Mazhar Kara. His profound connection to literature is evident in his reflections: “Literature, akin to music, serves as a lens through which we can explore reality, society, and the essence of life.”

Atlı elaborates on this synergy by stating that while music communicates through sound – a distinct language – literature constructs entire worlds through words and linguistic nuances. This enduring bond between the two art forms is a testament to their historical significance and ongoing relevance.

He emphasizes his personal journey of growth and understanding through literature, highlighting its invaluable role in shaping his artistic expression. “Reinterpreting the musicality inherent in poetry profoundly enhances my compositions and songs. As both a literature enthusiast and a composer, I engage deeply with poetic texts, transforming them into musical expressions. This dynamic relationship between literature and music is crucial, especially for languages facing challenges like ours. By fostering a synergy between these two art forms, I not only celebrate their interconnectedness, but also adopt a political stance that serves as a form of resistance against cultural erosion.” ●

Finalist for Miss Denmark Considers Kurdistan Her Home



Goran Shakhawan

is a Kurdish-American journalist and author based in the United States. He has covered news for several Kurdish news outlets and was a former senior correspondent for Kurdistan24 in Erbil and Washington D.C. He has published several books in Kurdish.



“

I am also aware of Kurdistan's division into four parts, Türkiye, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, but to a Palestinian woman like me, there's only one Kurdistan

”





Malak Amira was born and raised in Copenhagen, Denmark, with her parents coming to the country as refugees in the early 1980s. Arriving from Palestine, they suffered just as many Kurds do in being displaced from their homeland and longing for it. Currently studying social education at College Campus Carlsberg, Amira also works as a model, and was chosen as one of the top 30 finalists in the Miss Denmark 2024 beauty pageant. She recently sat down with *Kurdistan Chronicle* to discuss her journey and deeply personal connections with Kurdistan.

In Copenhagen, Amira grew up in a multicultural society among some Kurdish families, so she made many Kurdish friends. “I felt connected to the Kurds in many ways, notably because of the common Kurdish and Palestinian history of genocide. I felt as if the Kurdish community understood my background the best,” she shared.

She also, occasionally, had the opportunity to enjoy Kurdish food. “I have tasted many Kurdish dishes, such as *yaprax*, *qoraw*, rice and soup and my all-time favorite Kurdish dish, *kifta*,” she told *Kurdistan Chronicle*.

Amira sees many similarities between the Kurdish and Palestinian cultures. “Old Kurdish culture has many similarities with Palestinian culture; for example the old Kurdish *deg* tattoos look a lot like Palestinian tribal tattoos. Music, both traditional and modern, also plays a big role in both Palestinian and Kurdish culture. There is a lot of musical and poetic passion shared by the Kurds and Palestinians,” she said.

Sacrifice

Amira’s biggest wish is to inspire Middle Eastern women to embrace their beauty and to land on the cover of magazines. In her opinion Middle Eastern women have the beauty, talent, and strength to succeed in whatever they put their minds to. She hopes that her participation in Miss Denmark and future modelling competitions and professions will motivate and inspire women all over the world to follow their dreams. “Kurdish and Palestinian women have, in my estimation, the smallest representation as characters in movies, theaters, music, or novels in Denmark,” she said.

Amira had a personal message to Kurdish girls around the world: “I know that you might not always feel heard. I know that there is a lack of representation of you, your talents, and your beauty in the media. I know that you don’t always feel seen. I know the opportunities do not come easy to you and sometimes they might not even exist for you yet. I know that following your dreams and wishes is not an easy path to take. But dear Kurdish girl, I grew up among your Kurdish sisters in Denmark. I have witnessed how they turn suffering into strength and tragedy into art. I took a leap of faith to pursue a modeling career against Middle Eastern cultural barriers, with the help of Kurdish women,” she said.

The road to the Miss Denmark beauty pageant was not easy for Amira, but as she highlighted, she had the courage, strength, willpower, and beauty to take the leap. “I grew up watching my best friend Norah Hussein – a Kurdish poet from Halabja, Kurdistan living in Denmark and author of *Poetic Pulse* – realize her success and grow her career. I grew up seeing her turn pain into poetry and push the boundaries of equality for Middle Eastern women. She taught me how to make sacrifices for what I believed in,” she emphasized.

Sacrifice is a part of every dream, as Amira pointed out. “I sacrificed a lot but gained so much more, internally, spiritually, and externally. I became living proof that any Middle Eastern girl can follow their dream without getting permission from anyone.”

During challenging times, Amira turns to reading Hussein’s poem called “Inspire Me,” which has empowered her through the hardships that life brings.

“Inspire Me”

I kept looking for souls
in the nature of my reflection
Where my skin color is not covered in shame
and seeing hair as black as a poets ink
Or looking at the hill on my nose
To remind me of the heritage of my roots
I keep searching for ideals
To inspire me for the better
Not to change me
Into something else
Kurdish connection





As a stateless Palestinian, Amira considers herself a global citizen. “Home is not a location but a feeling. I feel at home where people respect me and value my integrity. Home could also be Kurdistan for me,” she said.

She plans to visit the Kurdistan Region someday. “I have promised myself that Kurdistan is on the top of my list of places that I must visit in the next five years. I would love to go and support the Miss Kurdistan beauty pageant, and who knows, even mentor some of them,” Amira shared.

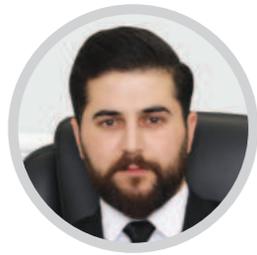
Amira grew up around Kurdish families and has a lot of knowledge about the history of the Kurds. “Norah (Hussein) and her family taught me about the 1988 Halabja massacre, which had a huge impact on her parents and Norah’s life,” she said. “I grew up listening to her parents talk about the beauty of the city, the innocence of the Kurdish people, and the traumatizing horror that happened to them.”

Amira has also participated in many *Newroz*, or Kurdish New Year, parties with her Kurdish friends. “The daffodil flower holds great symbolic value for the Kurds. All my Kurdish friends buy Danish daffodils at the beginning of spring and decorate their living rooms and kitchens with them,” she shared.

She also described Kurds as belonging to the mountains and being very fond of nature, birds, waterfalls, and especially flowers. “I am also aware of Kurdistan’s division into four parts, Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, but to a Palestinian woman like me, there’s only one Kurdistan.” ●



Chess in School Curriculums



Sabr Salih

is a journalist based in the Kurdistan Region.

After ongoing consultations and coordination between the prominent Khanzad Chess Club in Erbil and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Education in recent years, the KRG introduced “the game of chess into its educational curriculum for the 2023-2024 academic year. Grades five to nine will learn chess as part of their physical education courses, and there are now 150 teachers across different schools who have been trained to teach it.

Most developed countries in Europe and East Asia believe chess is a game that fosters creativity, contributes to brainstorming abilities, and boosts intelligence and cognitive power. The Kurdistan Region also has a considerable legacy with the game, which is popular among Kurdish leaders. With the formation of the KRG, several chess clubs were established for players and enthusiasts of the game. Khanzad Chess Club was founded in 1998 and has continued to train players and referees for nearly three decades.

Several textbooks have been selected to help students study the game systematically. School Chess, which was written by a committee at Khanzad Chess Club, is the main text and serves as a guidebook to educate pupils on how to play the game, whether at a beginner or advanced level.

Government support

Dilzar Hama Salih is the Administrator of Khanzad Chess Club and the director of

the project to implement chess education in Kurdish schools. In 2018, Salih helped write the first proposal, which was submitted to the Arts’ and Sports Institutes affiliated with the KRG Ministry of Education.

To raise awareness about the introduction of chess into the school curriculum, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani visited Khanzad Chess Club, met with the committee, and reaffirmed the government’s support for this project. He expressed his happiness that chess is now part of the education system in the Kurdistan Region. His excellency reiterated the significance of the game, noting its tradition among his forefathers, as well as his own passion for the strategic game. He even played a game against Salih during his visit to the club.

Salih was very impressed by the technicality and tenacity of Prime Minister Barzani’s chess techniques, which included rapid offensive moves and strong defensive capabilities. He also praised the Prime Minister’s chess talent, stating that his method of playing is that of a leader, as the best defense is a good offense. The game ended in a tie.

A global game

Chess is a strategic and sophisticated game, as well as one of the most popular in the world. It is played between two individuals on a board consisting of 64 cells divided into an 8x8 grid. Pieces are of

“

School Chess, which was written by a committee at Khanzad Chess Club, is the main text and serves as a guidebook to educate pupils on how to play the game, whether at a beginner or advanced level

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■ A mockup of the Kurdish school chess book.



Photo: Sabr Salih

■ Participants playing chess during a tournament hosted by the Erbil International Equestrian Club.

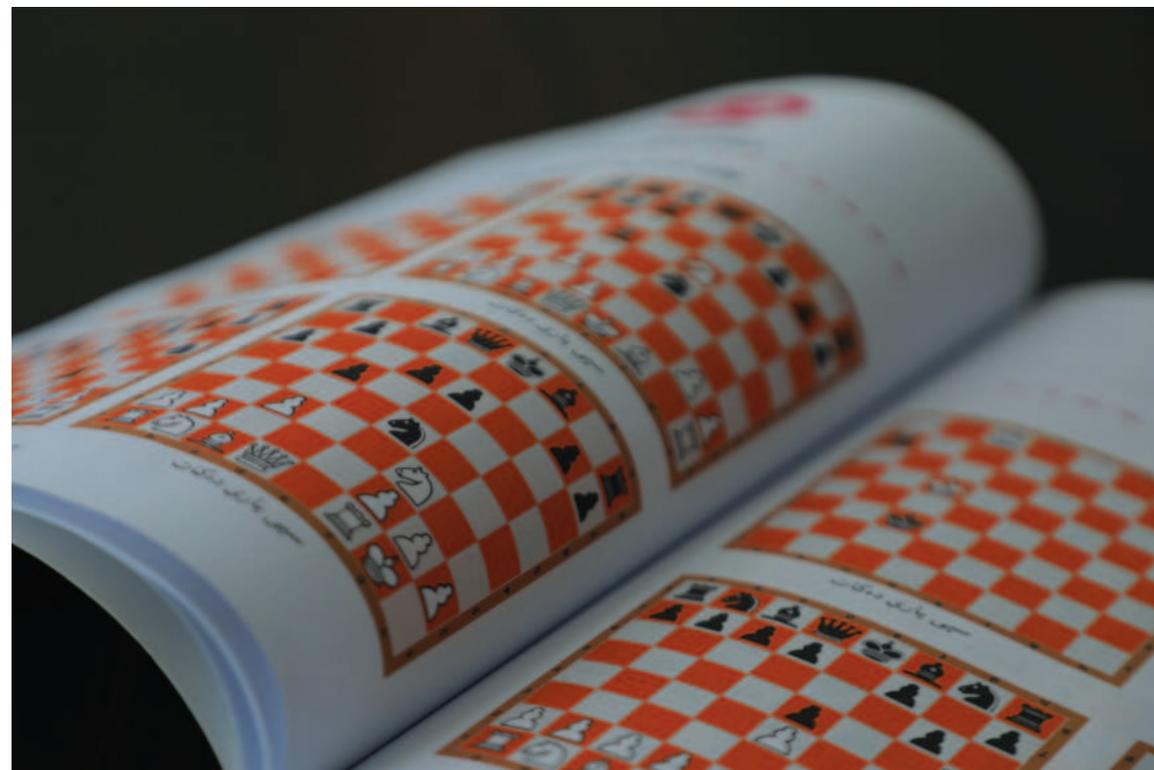


Photo: Sardar Sattar

■ Pages from the newly introduced School Chess, a textbook for learning chess in Kurdistan.



Photo: Sabr Salih

■ Chess tournament at Erbil International Equestrian Club.

contrasting colors, commonly white and black. The six different types of pieces are king, rook, bishop, queen, knight, and pawn. Game times can vary between 10 and 60 minutes; in tournaments, they are typically 10 minutes.

Chess dates to the sixth century BC, originating from an ancient king in what is now India. It has long been known as the “Game of Kings” because the playing board is like a miniature battlefield that requires planning, attacking, defending, and overall management.

People all over the world are familiar with chess, with millions of active players. With the development of computer games, chess has become available electronically for enthusiasts and has achieved high rankings among popular computer games.

The game is also widely appreciated for its ability to increase brain activity and improve both intelligence and concentration. Salih is eager to increase the popularity of chess in the Kurdistan Region and elevate the success of Kurdish players on the global stage. “The Kurdish individual

is smart and cautious. Unfortunately, this game has only recently been integrated into the education system,” he said.

According to the committee at Khanzad Chess Club that designed the textbook, the Iraqi Chess Federation has requested a translation of the book into Arabic so that it can be included in the Iraqi education system as well.

In the next phase of the project, Salih and his team say that they plan to add chess to university curricula. ●

World of Padel Reshaping the Sports Landscape in Kurdistan

Kurdistan Chronicle

In a region where football dominates the sporting scene, a new sport is about to make its way onto the court with the opening of World of Padel, the first indoor padel facility in the Kurdistan Region. The facility seeks to become not just a place for people to play the sport, but carries a wider vision of bringing people together, fostering healthy lifestyles, and leaving a legacy for others to follow. Behind this groundbreaking project is Adnan Chali, a seasoned Kurdish engineer and business developer who has worked in leading companies around the world but always had big dreams for his homeland.

“My journey with padel began in 2014 during a business trip in Sweden for my employer at the time. A colleague invited me to play for an hour, and I was instantly captivated,” Chali told *Kurdistan Chronicle* with great enthusiasm, noting that the opportunity not only entertained

him, but also sparked the idea of reimagining padel’s potential in the Kurdistan Region.

Padel is a racket sport invented only 50 years ago in Mexico. Also called padel tennis, the sport is typically played in teams of pairs, or doubles, on an enclosed court that is slightly smaller than a tennis court on which doubles is played. The scoring system is the same as tennis, but the rules, strokes, and techniques are different, and it is often considered a combination of tennis and squash, as the balls can be played off the walls. According to the International Padel Federation, there were more than 25 million active players in more than 90 countries as of 2023.

A bold vision

The rapid growth of padel around the world and Chali’s

first encounter with the sport inspired him to explore its business potential.

Soon after, he launched his own padel equipment brand, Avivan, which furnished racquets, balls, clothing, and other accessories. It was during this time when he envisioned introducing padel to Kurdistan. Ch-

especially group activities, among young people. This solidified my decision to bring padel to Kurdistan, with the hope of making it not just a sport, but a lifestyle that connects people of all backgrounds,” Chali explained in a tone filled with optimism.

Located in the heart of Erbil Avenue, a



ali saw an opportunity to make the region a hub for padel in the Middle East, both to grow the sport and build a strong community around it.

“In 2019, I conducted a feasibility study to evaluate its potential. The findings were clear: there was significant interest in sports,

neighborhood surrounded by a vibrant selection of renowned international restaurants, cafes, and exclusive businesses, the World of Padel tries to serve as more than just a sports destination, but a place where people can enjoy a complete day of activity outside of the home.

■ The rendered design of the World of Padel complex in Erbil.



On the inside, the facility is designed with diverse needs in mind, offering spacious modern changing rooms, secure locker storage, and dedicated warm-up areas to ensure players have everything they need for a great experience. In addition, Vibora Cafe at the center of the facility provides a cozy

leading padel academies to deliver advanced training programs.

“Whether you’re playing for fun or pursuing competitive goals, our academy ensures that every player can reach their full potential. Additionally, we’ve developed a user-friendly

ferent from other sport and entertainment centers in Erbil, Chali stressed that his project is dedicated to making the sport a significant part of the local community and culture.

“Our vision goes beyond just teaching the sport – we aim to foster a sense of

way to bring people together, promote a healthy lifestyle, and build lasting community bonds,” he insisted.

Becoming a padel hub in the Middle East

As padel is rapidly growing throughout the Middle East, especially in Gulf countries such as the UAE and Qatar, the project in the Kurdistan Region, which is set for a grand

inter-school tournaments, corporate matches, and national-level events.

After all, World of Padel is not merely a business for Adnan Chali to make a fortune. He has lived abroad since 1997, yet his bond with Kurdistan remained intact throughout the decades of living in diaspora. Witnessing the rapid development in the Kurdistan Region in recent years, he is



■ Athletes playing during the Genova Premier Padel tournament

space to refuel before or after games, and the Vibora Shop sells premium padel equipment and accessories.

Chali went on to reveal that they have partnered with one of the world’s

app to make booking, accessing facilities, and staying up-to-date on news and events seamless for all visitors,” he said.

Asked what sets World of Padel dif-

ferent from other sport and entertainment centers in Erbil, Chali stressed that his project is dedicated to making the sport a significant part of the local community and culture. Padel is not just a sport – it’s a

opening in March this year, hopes to soon gain momentum and attract padel lovers from around the region.

To further accelerate the popularity of the sport, Chali is planning to introduce padel into school programs. That, as he explained, paves the way for future plans, including

dedicated to contributing to a more prosperous future for his people.

“I believe in the region’s potential and want to play a part in its growth through innovative projects like World of Padel,” he underlined. ●

Photo Credit: International Padel Federation

Kurdish Student Sets New World Record



Mewan Dolamari

is a journalist, holding MA in International Studies from the University of Kurdistan-Hawler (UKH).

Mason Farhad Nariman, a talented young Kurdish refugee living in Sweden and a Vision Education scholarship recipient, has redefined the boundaries of human potential. In a stunning display of cognitive prowess and physical dexterity, he achieved the seemingly impossible: memorizing a sequence of 30 numbers while simultaneously juggling a football for a full 30 seconds with his feet. This extraordinary feat has officially set a new Guinness World Record.

The sheer mental and physical agility required for this feat is astounding. As Far-

had juggled the football, his mind was actively processing and storing the complex number sequence, a level of cognitive multitasking that is truly mind-boggling. To add an extra layer of complexity, he did not stop at simply memorizing the numbers. After successfully reciting the entire 30-number sequence, he playfully reversed the order, delivering every other digit while continuing to juggle. This extraordinary display of skill and mental flexibility is a testament to his exceptional talent and dedication.

Imagine the intricate coordination required: the precise footwork for the jug-

gling, the intense focus needed to memorize the numbers, and the rapid recall of information under pressure. Farhad's ability to integrate these cognitive and physical demands is a testament to his extraordinary talent and dedication.

"This achievement wouldn't have been possible without the principal support of Vision Education, which stood behind me every step of the way. When I hear Vision Education, one word always comes to mind: beacon – a guiding light in the darkness, especially during Sweden's long, dark winters," said Farhad.

Vision Education, the pioneering educational institution in the Kurdistan Region that has supported Farhad's journey, played a pivotal role in cul-

“
Kurdish youth are capable of extraordinary achievements when provided with the right opportunities and support

”
tivating his talents. By providing him with the necessary resources, scholarship, and encouragement, they have empowered him to reach his full potential.

"This record demonstrates that Kurdish youth are capable of extraordinary achievements when provided with the right opportunities and support," said Sara Salahaddin Mustafa, the CEO of Vision Education. "It is our mission to identify and nurture young talent, empowering them to reach their full potential and contribute to a brighter future for all."

As Farhad continues his academic pursuits, his Guinness World Record will stand as a lasting symbol of human potential, a reminder that with dedication, hard work, and the right support, even the most extraordinary dreams can become reality. ●



■ Mason Farhad Nareman holding the flag of Kurdistan.

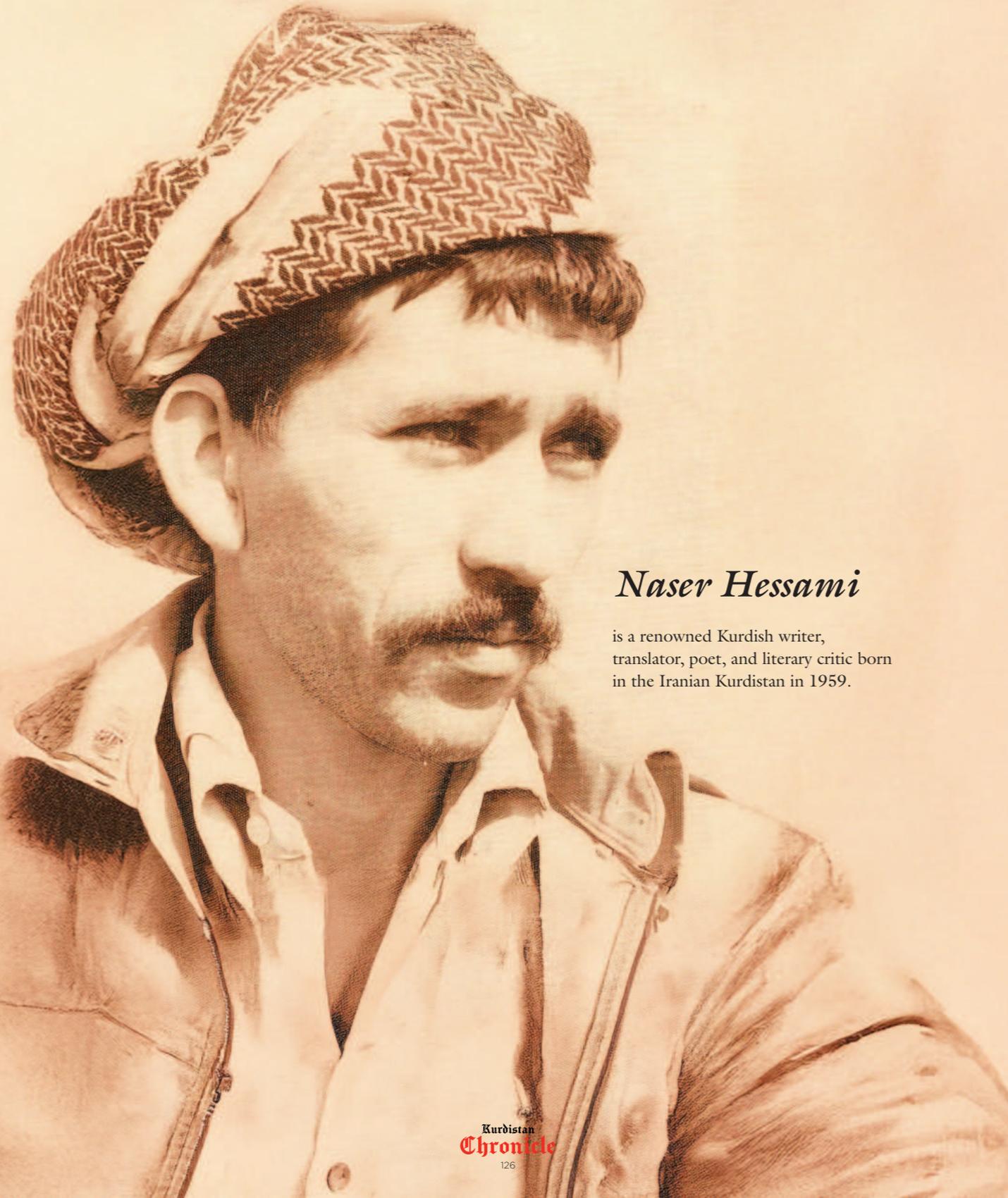
Photo Credit: Vision Education



■ Mason Farhad Nareman receiving a Guinness World Record certificate.

Photo Credit: Vision Education

POETRY



Naser Hessami

is a renowned Kurdish writer, translator, poet, and literary critic born in the Iranian Kurdistan in 1959.

My expectations are not too high.
Under a willow tree,
A hut, a porch,
And a fire.
A happy heart,
Two clear eyes,
And a homeland!

چاوه‌پوانیی من زۆر نییه.
به‌ر سیبه‌ری داره‌بیه‌ک،
کوخیک و به‌ره‌ه‌یوانیک و
ئاگردانیک.
دلێکی خۆش،
دوو چاوی روون،
نیشتمانییک.

Translated by Nahro Zagros



Common Buzzard (Buteo buteo)



The common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*), known as Baz in Kurdish, is one of the most common birds of prey in Kurdistan, though it is sometimes mistaken for the less common long-legged buzzard. This medium-sized raptor is highly adaptable, inhabiting a variety of landscapes including forests, grasslands, and mountains. An opportunistic hunter, the common buzzard feeds on mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, and carrion. Frequently seen soaring on thermal currents or perched on high vantage points, it is also known for its impressive acrobatic courtship displays. While some species migrate short distances in winter, others stay in their territories year-round. Common buzzards typically range from 40 to 58 cm in length, have a wingspan of 1.1 to 1.4 meters, and weigh between 0.43 and 1.4 kg.



A HOME YOU NEVER KNEW YOU HAD



 Amedi, Duhok Governorate,
Kurdistan Region
37.0917° N, 43.4877° E

VISIT

KURDISTAN

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A
Y
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Discover

the Heart of the
Middle East

